

The Quarter-Life Priest, and Other Crises:

Stories by Billy Hallal

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Ignition, or The Great American Four Loko Novella

When I was eighteen and still deciding about college, my cousin Madison imparted wisdom that proved more concise or potent than anything I'd learn the in next four years of studying marketing:

"Everything," he told me, "is an ad."

This was late in 2003, when Madison and his father had returned to Ohio for Thanksgiving or Christmas, and our conversation came at the end of a day when Madison, my cool cousin, older by six years, had been sneaking me rum and cokes—or maybe it was spiked eggnog—since five PM. It was one of those drunk conversations you have in abundance when you are eighteen and stupid, and yet they seem to stick with you. Despite the triple threat of war in Iraq, terrorism, and torture, I remember the early 2000s as one of the best times of my life, probably because I never watched the news.

"Advertising's a two-in-one," Madison went on. Once he started on a monologue like this, he couldn't be stopped. He'd gone to work for a New York ad agency almost as soon as he got out of college on a connection, I'm sure now, from his dad, my Uncle Jerry. "It's the ultimate two-in-one."

It's hard to imagine now, but just about all you needed to get a good job then was a bachelor's degree. That was in a time before Recessionomics, when we still thought the worst thing that could happen to the markets was the dot-com bust-9/11 double team. Of course, the makings for the coming crisis had already been set in motion—houses bought with bad credit, foolish investments rated as secure—but the economy would kindly wait to go to shit until the month after I graduated college.

He went on: “You make a hole—hey, my life is incomplete—and then you offer your product to fill up the whole. It’s the disease and the cure wrapped together.” He grinned, as he often did, at his own cleverness. “And all in thirty seconds or less.”

Up until that point, at my mother’s urgings, I had quietly been considering going to Kenyon or Otterbein or one of the other liberal arts schools we had visited at the urgings of my mother, an English professor at local Capitol, “just in case.” But that night Madison was able to convince me, as was his gift, to follow in his footsteps. Not long after that night, I decided, to my mother’s ill-disguised disappointment, to attend that temple of football and debauchery, Ohio State.

It wasn’t just that I wanted to be like Madison (though that was almost always part of it). It was that he had opened my eyes to the world of ads around me. It was as though I had been unplugged from the Matrix and, for the first time, could read the code, like I could see all my strings and how they were pulled. But I didn’t want to join the resistance. I wanted to become part of the machinery. That’s how I ended up graduating in 2008 with a major in marketing and, as Mom said with no little resentment, “a minor in drinking.” Had economic events gone differently that year, I may never have had to go to my cousin for a job, and I may never have helped Madison make a name for the most infamous drink of the decade.

That year I graduated with an internship, unpaid, but promising, with advertising giant McCann-Erikson in New York City. My internship lasted through the summer, and then ran into the economic shitstorm that was the financial collapse of 2008. I remember sitting in the corner cubicle I hoped would someday become my office when the collapse in motion for years, finally became impossible to ignore. I was looking at sports statistics instead of the marketing research I should have been doing when Trevor Bender, one of my fellow interns, rushed in.

“Miles, did you hear about this shit?” he said. “Fannie Mae is about to go under.”

I gave the response any well-educated student of marketing would have: “Who the fuck is Frannie Mae?”

“Not who, what.” Trevor was bent over my keyboard, pushing up his glasses and bringing up news sites on my screen. There were five of us interns that summer, and he was easily the odd man out. He was a finance major among marketing majors, and he regarded what the rest of us thought as a fun summer job with unnatural seriousness. “They’re a bond safeties firm, and they have billions of dollars of government securities tied in.”

“So that’s bad for the government then,” I said, not coming close to understanding the gravity of the situation.

“It’s bad for everyone,” he said. “More banks than just Bear-Stearns will collapse. People will get fucked over. *We* could get fucked over.”

“Relax, man,” I said. “We’ve got another few weeks here. We’re going to be fine.” I was under the impression that if we put in the bare minimum amount of effort, we were all but guaranteed job placement. How wrong I was. How naive.

The following morning I picked up a copy of the *Post* getting on the subway and realized that Trevor had, if anything, downplayed the significance of events. The headlines all but predicted a financial apocalypse. I arrived at our office in midtown Manhattan and commiserated with my fellow interns.

“We’re screwed,” Trevor kept saying, “completely screwed. No way they hire us now.”

“Why not?” asked Bryan Reznik. Bryan had a wrestler’s build that made most people reluctant to disagree with him. But he could be funny, and he was my favorite among the interns. We had been talking about co-signing for an apartment in Brooklyn as soon as we were hired. “It’s not our fault everything went to shit.”

“Yeah, it was Bush’s fault,” said Brent Radnor, a kid with a dyed-blond hair and douchey manner that complemented his name.

“Sure, if you read the *New York Times*,” said Bryan, getting heated. “Clinton signed off on sub-prime mortgages and now we’re in this mess.” I was amused by Bryan’s heartland conservatism, how if he saw anything in the country’s most widely-read newspaper, it would only convince him further it was untrue. With a build like his, it was hard to argue with him.

“Guys,” I said, “we’re getting distracted here.” Being a libertarian—which I viewed as a nice political cover for apathy—I didn’t have a dog in the fight, though I had always had grudging respect for Clinton’s college-kid cockiness. When I voted, it was Republican, but not for the family values or anything like that—it was more to piss my parents off than anything else.

“We’re going to be fine,” I told them. “We’ve got our feet in the door. We already work here.”

“We don’t get paid for what we do,” said Trevor. “We’re basically slave labor. They use us the rest of the summer and just kick us out.”

“I think you’re overreacting,” I said. “The internship lasts what, one more week? They’ll talk to us about job placement before the week is over. You’ll see.”

I thought I was being the voice of reason, but no one at McCann had spoken to me about a job when the last Friday in August, the last scheduled day of the internship, arrived. In fact, the real McCann employees had been speaking to us less and less, giving more directives through e-mail, and I was pretty sure I’d seen a couple of them glancing towards our corner of the office and laughing. I should have taken it as a bad sign, but I ignored it. That last Friday, though, a burly man from HR with the syntax of a robot came carrying five cardboard boxes.

He placed the boxes down in our section. “Thank you for your service to McCann,” he said. “We have no current job openings, but you’re welcome to stay on unpaid until a position is available.”

No one said anything. “How long might that be?” asked Trevor.

“We will be suspending all hirings for an indefinite period of time.”

The five of us packed, barely saying a word to each other. We all felt we’d received a too-early taste of the bitter disappointments of adulthood. It wasn’t even in the right order: we got fired before we got hired.

I didn’t know what else to do but return to Bexley, where my parents were making all kinds of discoveries about the new state of their 401K and retirement plans. I returned home to a kitchen table constantly covered in bank statements, my father squinting at them through his reading glasses. “How much have we lost today, Kate?” he’d ask. Dad was only acting as financial figurehead in this time of crisis—we all knew Mom was in charge. Dad, called the Absentminded Professor at our house, was too scatterbrained to pay his credit card bill on time, let alone run the house financially. It was an arrangement I found vaguely embarrassing, and I had decided early in life that the same thing wouldn’t happen to me.

“We’re looking at the real cost of federal deregulation here,” she’d say, looking over Dad’s shoulder. She’d turn her attention to me. “We have your buddy George to thank for that.” She was joking, as we did, about our opposing politics, but she had been a little brusque with me since my return. She seemed to think my sudden unemployment was comeuppance for my chosen career path. Mom, an English professor at Capitol University, was fond of reminding me that at the root of advertising was “advert”—to turn away from, she would say, the truth.

“Hey, talk to your boy Bill,” I’d say. “Ask him about sub-prime mortgages.” Much to my parents’ chagrin, I’d been cheering for the Republicans since I was twelve. It was my form of teenage rebellion—when I saw Dad’s dismay at the politically incorrect pronouncements of Rush Limbaugh, I just cranked it louder. My convictions, though, then as now, were far from genuine.

“Oh honey,” she said, turning to my dad in mock-woe, “How did we ever raise a Republican?” My parents are most everything you’d expect from a married pair of English majors. Dad taught high school

English and wrote short stories on the side, and Mom was a tenured professor writing a treatise on the middle and late works of Dickens. I was raised on Buffalo Springfield and NPR.

“You spent so much time guarding the front door,” I quipped, “that conservatism crept in the back.” I think that even at a young age I could sense something haughty about their life habits, a twinge of self-righteousness that went with recycling, with eating organic, with banning Sesame Street from our house because it had become too “commercial.” And I was embarrassed. It the cumilation of this smug self-righteousness that may have caused me to take Madison’s collegiate advice over that of my mother’s.

“Well honey, we’re very sorry about your job,” said Mom, leaving the bills to give me a quick hug. “But we know you’ll find another one soon.” She pulled away. “At least, you’d better.”

But three days passed and my job search, done entirely online, was unsuccessful. Dad wasn’t one much for confrontation, so Mom was called on to do some traditional-style parenting. She knocked on the door of my room, which I hadn’t left except for meals the past three days, and gestured for me to remove my headphones.

“I thought you were looking for a job,” she said.

“I am,” I told her, but with me sprawled on my bed in nothing but boxers and socks, it couldn’t have been too convincing.

“You haven’t left the house.”

“Don’t need to.” turned my laptop towards her and showed him the listings for internships I’d been looking through. “I’ve been sending out e-mails,” I told her. “No responses. They’ve taken half of them down since I started looking.”

“You ever think about getting a job without ‘unpaid’ in the title?” she asked.

“I’m just trying to get into the field. I’m a college graduate. I shouldn’t be mowing lawns to earn cash for the summer.”

“I don’t understand why your generation is allergic to manual labor,” she said. “There is no shame in the working with your hands. Or food service. I waitressed the summer I got out of college. Your father flipped burgers for over a year.”

And look what happened to him, I wanted to say. I sighed. “Those are the positions you need to take to move up, Mom. That’s how it works now.”

“Honey, thousands of qualified people are losing their jobs right now. You might need to accept that one college degree isn’t enough to get you hired in advertising.” She tapped her chin with her finger, her professor stance, which meant she was fake-thinking about something—what followed would be a plan she’d had all along disguised as a spur-of-the-moment idea. “But you know. I was talking to a friend at a small press in Westerville. They might be able to take someone on part-time.”

This was a plan Mom had been trying to enact the past four years—save Miles from the evils of advertising and bring him into the light of literature. It had started right before I moved into the dorms. She stood over me as I was packing and warned me not to stop reading while I was in college. “You know what people always forget about Scrooge?”

“No,” I had said, trying to cram all twenty pairs of my Abercrombie boxers (many of which hid water bottles filled with stolen vodka from my parents’ liquor cabinet) into a sports bag. Mom had just started her treatise on Dickens then, and she tended to bring up *A Christmas Carol* at seasonally inappropriate times.

“He used to read lots of books. Then he stopped reading sometime during business school and turned into a money-grubbing fiend. So let that be a lesson to you, mister.”

It was amazing how my mother, a ruthless grader of her students’ papers, readily embraced cliché concerning matters of her son’s reading habits.

Now, I was kind of heartened to see that my mother hadn't abandoned her grand scheme to convert me to the arts. Mostly I was annoyed. "I don't think that's for me, Mom." I said. "I'm not qualified."

She looked disappointed. "Well I suggest you find something to do in the next four days," she said, "or who knows? Way things are right now, we might have to start charging rent."

Despondent at the prospect of paying to live in the house I'd grown up in, I called up the man who'd become my main source of life wisdom.

"Cuz! How's life?" Madison didn't talk into phones, he yelled, like he was in a constant state of driving on the freeway or getting on an airplane. He probably got it from Uncle Jerry, Mom's older brother and part of the reason why she couldn't stand advertising. Jerry had become a massive success in advertising in the seventies, an heir to the last vestiges of the Marlboro Man glory days, and he'd contributed his creative power to an array of products she thought morally reprehensible, from cigarettes to Ronald Reagan. Since I was a kid, I liked Uncle Jerry because his car was fast, his clothes were cool, and he had a son six years older than me whom I idolized.

"Not great right now," I said. I told him the news about my internship. I hoped he could give me insight. There was no one I trusted, including my professors, to know more about modern advertising. The kid was literally named for the profession—Madison, working on Madison Avenue.

"I heard," he said. "Rough news, my friend. Lunch soon?" Meals with Madison were events I'd always looked forward to. When he'd come back to Ohio for a visit, it was always dinners downtown at Cameron Mitchell-owned restaurants and smuggled 30-packs of Miller High Life for me. I longed to follow him to Manhattan and join him in Ad-Land, even as I was drinking and whoring my way through four years at Ohio State.

"Absolutely. Where would you like to go?"

“How about someplace by my new office?” About halfway through my last year of college Madison had moved back to Central Ohio. He said he was working on a business plan with a partner from his firm, and that Ohio was a better test market than New York. When I’d ask him for details, he’d just wink and tell me it was top-secret. When I’d ask him why, he’d tell me it was because I was part of the test market.

“I didn’t realize you were up and running already,” I told him.

“That’s my business plan,” he said. “Blink and you’ll miss a lot.”

Mom wasn’t thrilled that I was meeting Madison for lunch. “Where are you two going?”

“Not sure,” I told her. “Someplace by his new office.”

“Oh God,” she said. “He’s not going to try to get you to work for him, is he?”

“I thought you wanted me to get a job,” I said.

“Yes, but not with him.”

“What’s wrong with him?” I tried to get an answer out of her, but when it came to Madison or his father, she always got evasive, torn between criticizing family and abiding by principles. “He’s just not reliable,” I managed to get out of her. “Your Uncle Jerry had to get him out of trouble a couple of times in New York.”

This was a development I hadn’t heard. “What kind of trouble?”

“Oh nothing legal, exactly,” she said. “But he needed some bailing out himself when that firm he tried to start tanked.”

I remembered Castle Advertising from my freshman year of college. I was so excited when I found out my cousin was breaking off to start his own New York advertising firm. “Get good grades, buddy,” he’d tell me, “and you could be working here when you graduate.” But by the end of sophomore year he stopped making those promises, and by junior year the firm quietly folded.

“That wasn’t all his fault though,” I said. “He just hired some wrong people.”

“He hired all of his college buddies,” she said. “I’m not a business major like you two, but that sounds like a bad idea to me.”

“It was a bold move for him to do it when he was young.”

“Bold, maybe,” she said. “Foolish, yes. The boy just dives into things. He doesn’t care who he drags along with him. And I’ll tell you something else—those friends Madison hired? They’re not his friends anymore. I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t get their last few paydays.”

“Madison wouldn’t do that,” I said, though in truth, it didn’t sound entirely unlike him. “Come on Mom, this is just lunch.”

“Just promise me you won’t get pulled into some half-formed business plan just because he offers to let you borrow his car or something.”

“Mom, I’m not fifteen. He’s not my hero.” I believed it when I said it. It seems old heroes, like old habits, die hard.

Lunch was not the usual flashy fare. We ate Chinese at the outskirts of downtown and I got a primer on Madison’s new business, Ignition Beverages. His product had been designed, made, and bottled, and it was already on the shelves of “select test market stores” (I would later discover these were the convenience stores on Summit most often hit up by underage students and homeless men). The product, as he pitched it to me then and defends it to this day, was “an alcohol-infused energy drink”.

I asked him if it was anything like Speedball, and he laughed. “We get that a lot,” he told me, “but believe me, this is different.”

“Different how?” I asked.

The failed marketing campaign of Speedball was a case I had followed with amused interest. Its brief rise and fall had happened sometime around my junior year of college. One of maybe twenty rappers with “Little” in his name that year decided to launch a drink a lot like Madison’s, except instead

of using white people-friendly phrases like “infused,” he called it “Red Bull with balls.” There was public outcry over the name “Speedball” and its drug-friendly connotations. Legal action was threatened. Convenience stores were afraid to carry it. In the meantime Little Whathisname was busy inserting Speedball references into his songs and music videos and having a very public dispute with his advertisers over whether to change the name. The whole thing ended in an untimely manner when our rapper was arrested for possession of—what else?—cocaine and heroin.

“You can buy the last remaining Speedballs online,” said Madison “They’re going on Craigslist for up to \$20 a can.”

“Probably for the novelty,” I said. “It sells, I guess.”

“Booze is what sells, cuz,” he said. “And the great thing is that people, especially in your age bracket, are always looking for new and exciting ways to consume it.”

I smiled. Madison was in pitch mode already, a slightly more exaggerated version of how I’d always imagined him in the boardroom. “And what makes your product new and exciting?”

“Well, it doesn’t taste like grain alcohol for one,” he said. “It’s stronger, and it’s sweeter.”

“Isn’t combining alcohol and caffeine dangerous?” I wanted to play the skeptic, the devil’s advocate, but he’d already taken off running.

“Ever drink a rum and coke? Vodka red bull? Jagerbomb? Same concept, in a can. And it’s available at a very affordable price for your typical college student.”

“So that’s why you came back to Ohio,” I said. “To find the typical college student.”

“You’ve got plenty to go around here. That’s one thing the Obama people got right, putting themselves near all those young voters. His campaign headquarters for the entire state of Ohio is on High Street right across from campus.”

I had heard my parents mention it with pride in the few days I’d been back in Ohio. They had, along with many of their neighbors and colleagues, stocked up on Obama bumper stickers and yard

signs. I was underwhelmed by the man's politics, but I was in awe of his marketing team: with Hope, Change, and Gotham font, they had turned a big-eared senator from Chicago into a political superhero.

"So do you think McCain will win it?" I asked. We laughed. We knew a lost cause when we saw one.

Madison gave me a brief tour of the manufacturing plant, which felt sticky, like someone had built it entirely out of the floors of movie theaters and college bars. The overpowering sweetness of sugar water combined with the sharp bitterness of alcohol combined for a smell that reminded me strangely of the dorm rooms of girls I'd slept with freshman year. I think I could tell even then, although I tried to ignore it, that it was a sickly sweetness, almost fatal. It was a sweetness that would lead, in the coming year, to dozens of alcohol-related hospitalizations, and even a couple deaths. After what happened, I suppose I can share in some of the blame for that as well.

"So tell me what happened at McCann," Madison said when we got back to his office. I described to him the work I'd done over the summer and the immediate terms of my release at its end. He shook his head. "Let me ask you a question," he said. "What did you do when you got off work?"

"Oh, you know," I said. "Touristy things. Statue of Liberty, Empire State, all that. Uh, went to a couple bars..."

"A couple?" he said. "Cuz, I've done the new-to-New-York thing. You can be honest with me."

And so I was. I told him about my quixotic, bar-hopping, bank account-draining quest to sleep with a real Manhattanite. It was something the other interns and I planned and imagined all the time, but I never actually succeeded in bringing a girl back to the apartment until my last week in the city. In between the tortured silences of breakfast the next morning, I found out she was in New York on an internship from the University of Wisconsin, a state she'd lived in her entire life. When she found out I was from Ohio, it could have been the basis of a Midwestern bond on which to build a real relationship,

but I don't think either of us could get over the disappointment of not having slept with a real New Yorker.

"You never stayed late after work?" he asked. "Never asked to sit in on meetings and pitches? How about this: ever go out for drinks with the guys at McCann, or just the interns?"

As Madison spoke I realized that in the excitement of the bright lights and the big city, I had come much closer to living the story of *Bright Lights, Big City* than I had to securing a job. I'd ignored the advice of my uncle, my cousin, and a few candid business school professors: kiss as much ass as possible.

"Here's the thing about guys who study marketing in school," said Madison. "They all think that they have one great idea that's going to get them hired and change the face of advertising forever. And when the interviewer asks, 'What else you got?' they just shrug. You need more than just a clever idea to get into the game."

"What do you need?" I asked.

"Now? More than I did, definitely. A college degree now is worth about as much as a high school degree was then—everybody's got one, right? Grad school seems to impress people. Maybe you should go. Or go out and get some real job experience."

"Any openings with Ignition?" I said, half-joking. I was a little disillusioned of my cousin at this point, my once-cherished hero now nursing a beer gut and using his New York savvy to take advantage of Midwestern college kids. So of course the first thing I did was ask him for a job.

He said no, he was afraid not, and I began to persist, to insist that there must be some entry-level positions available at a small business such as his. He said times were tough, they were not hiring at this time.

"Listen," he finally said. "I would love nothing more than to give my little cousin a job, even if it was cleaning the factory floor. But you know I've had some, ah, issues with hiring friends in the past. You'd think I would know better than to go into business with another one."

“Are you talking about Jeremy?” I asked. I had met Jeremy once or twice when he was rooming with Madison in college. He was the one who had come up with the formula for Ignition, and he was the co-owner of Ignition Beverages.

“Jeremy is weathering a bit of a legal battle right now,” said Madison. “I’m in a controversial business at a dangerous time. We’re under scrutiny right now and I frankly can’t afford to have charges of nepotism tacked on to that.”

“What happened with your partner?” I asked.

Madison sighed. “We tried to do some distribution events over the summer, got a van and everything. Jeremy gets a little enthusiastic at these things, a little too enthusiastic, and he may or may not have given out cans of Ignition to some nineteen year-old girls.”

“That’s bad.”

“Like I said, tough times for everyone. We’ve got to be careful hiring with this sub-prime shit going down right now. When will we hit bottom? Nobody knows.”

“Who’s handling your advertising?”

“I am. Who the fuck did you think was?” Madison laughed. “You think I’m going to lease out advertising I can handle myself to the Knights of Columbus?” That Madison did not think twice about talking down about the city he’d grown up in, the city I hadn’t left, shows his the bounds of his arrogance.

“Of course not,” I said.

“Listen, cuz. You’re young, you’re pretty smart. Someone at some small business somewhere will hire you. Unless Obama wins, and then you’re completely fucked.” He laughed. “Maybe grad school is the thing to do, with the market the way it is. That could be fun.”

“I don’t know if I have the grades for that.”

“Then get creative, cuz.”

It may have been this parting shot from Madison that gave me the idea I pitched to my mom with the ferocity of a Madison Avenue adman when I got home.

“Send me back to school,” I told them, “to get a degree in English.”

I’d done the math in my head, I told them, and if I were to go back to school in the fall full-time, I could finish the requirements for an English major in three quarters. Marketing was a good degree to have, I told them, but I could make myself seem more valuable to potential employers with an additional degree.

“Are you sure you could go back to school?” asked my mom, though I could tell she was hiding excitement. “You just left.” English was chosen partly out of idle interest, but mostly because I knew it was the one major that would get her to agree to the plan.

“I’ve done the research”—this was a lie—“and you can always go back for a second degree. You don’t have to take more than a summer off.”

There were a lot of questions to answer: funding, focus, and the uncomfortable question of wouldn’t I rather go to Capital, where she was teaching, and could probably get discounted tuition? I explained to her that my credits were already good at Ohio State, that I knew it better, that I still had friends there—only partially true, as I had, in the past few weeks, developed disdain for my younger friends reserved for alumni of any school who gather and smirk, how much better their particular class was than the current generation.

Mom was overjoyed about my new field of study; Dad was cautiously optimistic. My return to school was conditional on me getting a job the first quarter. He wanted to make sure he was getting his (but mostly Mom’s) money’s worth. “I don’t want you getting the same grades you got freshman year,” he said.

“Dad,” I said, “I can promise you, I will be focused only on school.”

This, too, was a lie.

In late September of 2008, when the population of Columbus swelled with thousands of young college students, I returned to the school I thought I'd left forever, this time to study English. But in those three months things had changed. There was an anxiousness that started with the seniors and went right down to the incoming freshmen. Never in my four years of higher education had I heard so much discussion about the future so early in the year. In my graduating class, getting a job was an afterthought attached to backpacking through Europe for the summer. This new senior class wasn't even talking about jobs. They talked about getting into grad schools like it was their last best hope. There was an explosion of the "Test Prep" companies that claimed to give you a "competitive edge." Weeks into the quarter, past the usual point of freshmen naiveté (once their inboxes get flooded with the fifty clubs they've signed up for), I saw what looked like first years positively swarming a table for a company that claimed to possess the secrets of the LSAT and the GRE.

The school's clubs, of which there are several hundred, had changed their tactics too. The advertising strategy of their posters and flyers used to be "Join our club! Make friends! Get laid (maybe)!" Now the message veered more towards "Make connections! Get money!"

I took note of the club posters because I sometimes thought about joining one, not for any particular area of interest or resume booster, but for people to hang out with. When I'd pitched my college idea to my parents, I couldn't have imagined how lonely it would be. To save money I'd rented an apartment in Grandview away from my fellow undergrads. My fellow renters were mostly grad students in the sciences who all but slept in the labs on campus. I'd taken a couple English classes more than the typical business major to fulfill graduation requirements, but I still had to start out at the lower level, which meant a four-year, soon to be five-year, age difference between me and most of my classmates.

My friends, most of them my age or older (hanging with Madison as a kid had made me enamored with those more mature than me) had been smart enough to graduate and grab real jobs.

The few younger acquaintances I had, I didn't like them enough to contact, plus I didn't want them to know I was a guy who couldn't get a job and was now enrolled in school again. I started bringing required reading into Treacher's, an uncrowded dive two blocks from my place, on Friday nights. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't run into Turner Hotchkins, my first-year roommate, one night in mid-October.

I was downtown on my ongoing job hunt. Things were getting desperate at that point—I was even starting to inquire at non-profit organizations. After an unsuccessful inquiry in the Brewery District, I was grabbing lunch at the café of the Huntington building when the Hotchkins spotted me and came over to my table.

"Miles!" he exclaimed. He was as rotund as he'd been when I roomed with him, but his hair, formerly down to his shoulders, now stopped at the neck. "Do you work here now?" he asked, bewildered. I told him no, and when he asked me what I was doing I had to own up to my status as a repeat-undergrad.

"No shame in that," he told me. "Expand the mind a little more, right?" He was always saying things like that. He'd been an all right roommate until he started reading *Atlas Shrugged* the end of fall quarter. It had made him insufferable for weeks.

I could tell he wanted to sit down and brag about his exploits with the bank, but he wasn't on his lunch break and he had to go. He invited me for drinks in the Arena District with his coworkers that evening, and out of desperation I accepted.

Against all expectations, I had a good time that night. Hotchkins was smug, but bearable. His coworkers were young and friendly, and they hushed him whenever he started on an Objectivist rant. They asked me questions in earnest about my return to school and what I hoped to accomplish with a double degree. My pleasure was tempered with pangs of jealousy towards Hotchkins. He belonged to a world that could have been mine, that I'd been on the verge of and lost.

The more I drank, the more my tolerance for former roommate increased, so I was feeling downright chummy with Hotchkins by the time the night was over. His co-workers went home and he and I stayed at the bar til last call, laughing about the mishaps of our largely endogametic group of friends.

“Have you heard from Bryce?” asked Turner. Bryce Feldman was a business school classmate who would say, less than half-joking, that he only dated “women of color.” In our time at Ohio State he’d dated a Persian, a Lebanese girl, and a Bangladeshi (he had to remind us on a daily basis that she was not “his Indian girlfriend.”).

“That kid was a douchebag,” I said, laughing with the mirth and honesty that beer provides.

“He was all right,” said Turner. “He just had selective taste in women. I mean, some of them were pretty attractive.”

I shrugged. “I guess so.” When it came to Middle Eastern girls, I was largely indifferent. Maybe it was the fault of the food: Mom’s liberal prerogative included hummus at every Capitol faculty gathering at our house. Hummus, to me, tastes like being twelve and forced to stand around awkwardly while professors debate the postmodern aesthetics of David Foster Wallace. “I just can’t really see the attraction.”

“How about Del?” For all his hard-edged political rhetoric, Turner waxed nostalgic three pitchers in.

“He was all right,” I said. Adelbert Fogelberg was a badly-named, baby-faced accounting major singularly untalented at talking to women. “I think he may have made it through four years of college without getting laid.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” said Turner, looking at the foam in his glass. I wondered if I’d hit a sore spot for him—Turner had never been that great with girls himself. Feeling bad, I changed the subject. “You remember that house party we had at my place for my 21st birthday?”

Turner's face lit up. "The pyramid scheme girls?" he said. "I heard about that one. Hilarious."

The story Turner was referring to, one I was pretty sure he only knew second-hand, was a favorite among our business school friends. The night of my birthday, Del had been engaged in a long round of conversing and drinking with not just one but two attractive blondes in my kitchen. "Who is Fogel talking to?" was a common query of that evening, a question that turned more serious when we realized no one could give the answer. The girls had arrived, it was said, around 11:15 with a Marine-looking guy who started playing quarters with my next-door neighbors on the porch. The girls were good-looking and had brought a case of beer, which made them, to me, the host, more than welcome. We took turns peeking into the kitchen at Del's progress and came back shouting, "Tonight's the night! Tonight's the night!"

Del went home with neither of them. He passed out on my couch at 2:30, but not before, he remembered, getting both their numbers. It wasn't until the next week, when he received an e-mail about his "incoming sales package," that he remembered giving them his e-mail address and signing some sheet of paper. The girls had enrolled him in a pyramid scheme.

"Can you believe those girls?" said Turner. "That was one well-executed plan." He chuckled. "They certainly took advantage of their good looks."

"And Fogelberg's bad ones," I said. "What a job that must be. Going to parties and scamming undergrads."

"Like hunting ducks with an elephant gun," said Turner.

"Like hunting the ground with your foot," I said.

The bar was closing soon, and we decided to call it a night, hailing cabs to our bachelor's apartments. It was the next morning, as I nursed a light hangover with coffee in my empty apartment, that the idea hit me.

Being born within fifty miles of Columbus will likely make you a Buckeye or life, but since high school I've been a secret admirer of the Ivy League. Critics may complain about the stench of old money, but Ivy grads should receive credit for their ingenuity. Sometime in high school I read a *Newsweek* article about how if Harvard grads can't get a job, they just make one up. I guess I took that to heart, because that very morning I called my cousin Madison to invent a job for myself.

I pulled a page out of the Madison Castle School of Business and invited him to a late lunch near my apartment. It was at my new haunt Treacher's, the kind of place where if you order a beer at noon, no one looks at you twice. I plied Madison with one of these, then launched into a conversation about his marketing strategy.

"We're trying to saturate the campus area right now," he told me. "Get on billboards and buses and stuff. Sales are a little slow now, but that's because the name just isn't out there."

"What's the issue?"

"Stores don't know how to sell it, that's a big problem," he said. "Ignition gets lumped in with a bunch of Speedball knockoffs. If there's nothing they do to distinguish it, then kids have no reason to switch. If you don't read the damn can, you won't even know how strong it is." Madison was uncharacteristically irate about the whole thing. I saw my opening and went for it.

"Let me ask you a question, Mad," I said. "Have you ever seen an ad for Natural Light?"

"No."

"Exactly. The stuff sells itself. It's cheap, and the cool kids bring it to the party." I leaned forward on the table for emphasis. "Here's what I'm telling you: I can make you the cool kid. Except the party is the largest campus for undergrads in the country."

Madison was quiet for a moment. "Tell me more."

"You can advertise all you want near campus, but I know college kids. I know how they drink, and the best advertisement you can get for Ignition is to have someone drinking it. Kids will see it, they'll

try it, they'll mention it to their friends. You know, that laundry list from the weekend: 'I got hammered bro, and all I had was a couple cans of Ignition.' 'What's Ignition?' Do you see where I'm going with this?"

"Put the product out there, not just the name."

"Exactly."

"Miles, believe me, I'd love to, but after we got in trouble this summer we can't just give this shit out for free."

"You can't. But I can."

"Beg pardon?"

"You giving away Ignition is not the same thing as me giving it away. You're an adult, and college kids don't trust adults. We all know you've got an agenda. Me, I'm a student. I'm just trying to get hammered. Plus I know about this great drink Ignition, and yeah, bro, I have an extra."

Madison looked skeptical. "You're talking about covert marketing?"

"I'm talking about marketing to the masses. It'll start on a small scale, but it will expand. Campus isn't as big as you think. Before you know it, you'll have hundreds of people marketing for you without even knowing it, because they'll be drinking Ignition and talking about Ignition. They'll be throwing Ignition-themed parties. Parties where the only drink is Ignition, and the only song they play is the Remix to Ignition by R Kelly." I considered this, and shuddered. "Maybe not that last part, actually, but you get what I'm saying."

Madison stared into his beer thoughtfully. "I couldn't put you on the payroll, exactly," he said.

"How about inexactly?" I asked.

He grinned. "I'll start you off with a bulk package of the stuff. Let's see how you do with it before we start talking payment."

I nodded. "Sure you don't mind giving your stash away?"

“Are you kidding me?” he said. “I can’t stand drinking that shit.”

Part of me wishes I’d recorded the conversation. It would have made an excellent capping-off to the damning arguments against Ignition and would help feed assertions comparing my cousin to a drug dealer. But my cousin is not Manuel Noriega. His methods may be a bit sordid, his arguments, repeated, that he believes, “as many in the public do, that the combination of alcohol and caffeine is not harmful” may be arrogant, but I would not want to insult drug dealers of the world by putting Madison Castle on their level.

I pitched the rest of my idea to Madison. “This project is not something I could do myself. I’d need a couple helpers. You know, wingmen of sorts. Or wing-women.”

He considered this. “We don’t want to be too loose with funding right now,” he said. “No more than two.”

“Any ideas where I could find two attractive girls to help me give away booze?”

Madison just grinned.

I barely had time to ride the wave of my success—I had to put a team together. Problem was, I had no idea how the hell to pitch this job I’d made. I’d made astounding leaps in a matter of hours, but now I was stuck with a complicated and legally ambiguous job description. The conundrum: how to advertise, how to pitch this job, so that it attracted the right kind of people. Alcohol, then, should be left out of the description entirely. Maybe hinted at subtly. I at least needed someone who knew how to party. “Must be comfortable in social situations.” There we go. And we had to account for its odd hours: “Must be available to work weekends.” Only weekends, really. That would cut applicants down to the most dedicated. Then there was the problem of off-the-books payment. “Students will join recent graduate”—technically true—“on a business venture. Payment is negotiable.”

I plastered this cryptically-worded poster on the corkboards of as many campus buildings as I could, but I pinned them up with a heavy heart. Every time I read the poster it sounded less appealing. I

anticipated maybe three calls at most. But I underestimated the desperation of these post-collapse college kids to leap at any job not demanding manual labor). In the first week after I put up the posters I got five inquiries; in the second week, seven. On a macro level, twelve students out of a pool of fifty thousand or so (excluding grad students) is, pick your metaphor, a drop in the ocean, a needle in the hay, etc. But for me those calls meant I had to schedule a dozen personal interviews. Twelve students were coming to me for a job. I'm sure I don't have to explain the wonders that that "Hey, these people want to work for *me*" does for a man's self esteem.

In the early interviews, I botched things up worse than the job candidates ever could have. My idea suddenly sounded sleazy and corrupt when described to fresh-faced underclassmen looking for part-time resume boosters. When the time came for the job description, I stammered. I soft-pedaled the whole enterprise, claiming something about "brand recognition," a term I latched onto like a fat kid grips the wall of a swimming pool. I also made repeated use of the phrase "raise awareness of the product in a social setting," which sounds intelligent until you repeat it five times in the same conversation. The candidates, I think, were too embarrassed to ask me to explain myself further. I'd give them a handshake before they left, promising to get back to them in no more than two weeks, and I'd sit back down in the chair of the High Street café I used for interviews and feel a foreboding sense of failure.

It took me until the fourth interview, a damp Tuesday the week before Halloween, to find my rhythm, and that was also how I found my first employee. It was also my first interview with a good-looking girl. Some might find it sleazy, but I needed, essentially, walking billboards for Ignition. Of course, when the only two requirements for your employees are that they're attractive and female, I guess what wound up happening was sort of inevitable.

The first thing I noticed about Nadia Abouhassen was her nose. It wasn't grotesquely large, just prominent, and accented by a birthmark in the same place a diamond stud would have gone. As I

panned out from the nose to take in her olive-tanned skin and ink-black hair, I realized she was objectively attractive, but not in my personally preferred category of attractiveness. Bryce Feldman would have loved her.

“Nadia, right?” I said, getting up to greet her. “Good to meet you. Did I say that right?” When she entered I had been struck by the old liberal fear (I am my parents’ son, after all) of saying something culturally insensitive.

She told me I’d said it fine. “I’ve heard much worse,” she said. She had only the faintest traces of an accent, easy to miss, a sort of blurring of *l*’s and *r*’s you might hear from a native Spanish-speaker. “I’ve lived in Cleveland for a while, they say it pretty funny up there.”

“Cleveland accents,” I said. “God, they’re the worst.” I hadn’t met many Clevelanders before I started at Ohio State, but my four years of undergrad had been full of them and their Chief Wahoos and their unnatural pride for a dying city.

“They are strong accents,” she said, and proceeded to do a dead-on Cleveland accent—*“Nyyadia”*—that surprised me into laughter.

“You do that very well,” I said. I meant it to be genuine, but as soon as I said it, I worried she’d think I was patronizing her. I was caught off guard— Middle Eastern girls, I’d thought, were submissive and stern. Nadia was soft-spoken, but she was, I would come to learn, quietly confident. She didn’t joke around much, but when she did, her timing was impeccable. A lot of girls I knew in college didn’t know how to joke around very well, or if they did, they were loud and obnoxious about it, but Nadia had found the right balance between the two.

“Why don’t you tell me about yourself” is the customary first question of an interview, and Nadia was happy to oblige. She had spent the first thirteen years of her life in Syria. For reasons left ambiguous, her father, a respected doctor there, moved her and her family to Cleveland. Since doing research I suspect that, as is the case with many Syrian exiles, some dodging of the country’s

compulsory military service was involved. She'd spent her summers on campus taking classes, and in the spring she was to graduate a year early with a degree in anthropology.

"I know some Lebanese kids from Cleveland," I told her. "Is that, like, a similar thing? To the Syrians?" I was about to say 'the same thing,' but I even as I spoke I could sense the ignorance in what I was asking.

Nadia just laughed. "There are similarities," she said. "But do not say that to my father. He hates the Lebanese."

She and her older sister, it turned out, had attended a small Catholic school in Cleveland's suburbs, a place I knew by reputation from Cleveland-area friends as an epicenter of high school depravity, top-shelf liquor and recreational drug use.

"I hear that's a pretty wild place," I said. "Did you party much there?" Every other question I asked was either insensitive or stupid. I hadn't acted this dumb around a girl since junior high, and I didn't even *like* this girl, not in that way. Surely I must have set some gold standard in interviewer unprofessionalism.

"I did not," she said. "My sister, though, yes."

"Did she go here as well?"

"For a while, yes," she said. "She did not finish."

I didn't press the point. I would learn more about her sister later. "Have you ever gone back to Syria?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "we have lots of family and friends there. My boyfriend lives there too."

I was flooded with relief. She was taken. Maybe now I could stop being so damn awkward. "What is that like? Having a boyfriend in Syria?" I was genuinely curious, and I wanted to ask more. A relationship in her parents' homeland seemed arranged. It smacked to me of the patriarchy the Middle East is said to uphold. But I had made enough cultural faux pas in the interview, and I restrained.

"It's hard, sometimes. I do not get to see him very often. But I am going back over winter break."

I couldn't identify with anything about long-distance relationships. The 'relationships' I had in undergrad were only that in the basest sense of the word—for me and the women in my life, distance wasn't an obstacle, it was a goal.

"So what do you want to do with anthropology?" I asked. The corny forensics shows I sometimes watched usually had an attractive anthropologist or two in the cast. "Criminology and stuff?"

"A lot of people think that. I'm focusing on cultural anthropology. I'm trying to go to grad school for it."

An old alarm bell went off in the back of my head. When I was in high school, it was in vogue for girls who wanted to seem sensitive to gush about *cultures*, people that were so much more interesting than America, they just loved other *cultures*. Mostly it was an excuse to date guys with accents. But Nadia didn't strike me as that type—her interest seemed genuine.

"So those people who go into the jungle," I said. My recollection of anthropology was hazy—that was a 9:30 class, and I missed quite a few.

"Some go to the jungle," she said. "But any culture is worth studying."

"Even our culture?" I asked, and felt instantly guilty. I had meant college culture, Ohio State culture, football on Saturdays and nut-shaped mascots and dorm food, but it sounded like a challenge to her foreign-ness.

"Of course," she said, looking down at the table and smiling. "There is a fascinating culture here." It didn't strike me at the time, but she might have felt self-conscious because studying college culture is exactly what she was doing. She brought an outsider's perspective to college, but in order to be a good anthropologist she needed to immerse herself in some way. Applying for my job, I now think, was just her way of getting in. She was such an unlikely candidate that I had to have her on the team. But first I had to sell it to her.

“Well,” I said, going into pitch mode. I was at ease now, and, inspired, I improvised. I could almost hear Madison laughing with approval when I said: “There are few ideas more American than the two-in-one. Think about, say, the washer-dryer. The convenience store and gas station. The Taco Bell-Pizza Hut. My cousin has designed a drink that combines two things Americans love: caffeine and alcohol. And I think you could really help me sell it.” I explained the concept of my marketing plan to her, this time as plainly as I could. “So, we find parties with lots of people in attendance, and that is where we market the product.”

“Do we know these people at the parties?” she asked.

I gave a light laugh to cover discomfort. “No,” I said, “probably not. Although we might. You never know who you might run into off-campus. Does that, I don’t know, make you uncomfortable?”

She shook her head. “In Syria strangers will invite you right in. It just doesn’t seem to be as common here.”

“It’s different in college,” I assured her. “When I would go to parties freshman year, half the time I wouldn’t know whose house it was.” That was probably because I was blitzed out of my mind half the time, I thought, but I didn’t want to tell her that.

“So what do we do once we get there?” she asked.

“We blend in with our surroundings, and we, well, we sell the product.”

“Will we have a way to keep track of the money?”

“No, when I say ‘sell’ the product, I mean we market it, we advertise it. And we don’t do it the usual way, with signs or anything. We do it just by drinking it.”

It occurred to me then that Nadia, being Middle Eastern, might also be a Muslim, which was fine with me except that I was pretty sure Muslims could not drink—a cultural taboo as alien to me as the mating rituals of Venusians—and that might seriously prohibit her productivity on the job.

“Of course we don’t actually have to drink it,” I added lamely. “We can also, you know, pretend. Would that be all right?”

Nadia only hesitated a moment before saying yes, and I didn’t press her further. It wasn’t until our second or third assignment that I felt comfortable enough to ask her about her religion. I had been raised in the Church of Melville, with readings each Sunday from the Gospel of Twain, and in conversations about theology and a higher being I always tended to go quiet.

“This could be fun,” she said, “pretending. If I were to get the job.” I needn’t have worried about Nadia: she wanted to study the American college student in its natural environment. This job was the opportunity to study what she was missing, to pretend to become a part of it without betraying her heritage.

“Exactly. Pretending is fun. We’re like undercover cops, but instead, we’re undercover partiers. Students, pretending to be, um, students.”

“Is this legal?”

I laughed. “Of course,” I said. “Well. It’s certainly not illegal, anyway.”

During the rest of the interviews, I lost my stutter when giving the job description. The “undercover cop, but opposite” analogy worked well. I told Nadia I’d keep in touch, but I knew before she left that I would hire her. She had a genuinely warm personality combined with an exotic kind of look some might call beauty. I needed someone more traditionally attractive, a girl next door-type, and I found that someone the same week in Clara Hines.

Clara was studying theater, which set off a couple simultaneous alarm bells in my head. The first was that girls who study theater are, traditionally, insane, or at least as unstable as the elements at the bottom of the periodic table (I knew this from a girl with whom I had been “talking”, in the parlance of our times, in the winter of 2007; the next quarter, when I began “talking” to someone else, Theater Girl sent her an online message detailing three venereal diseases I did not have). The second was a positive:

acting, to some extent, was a necessity of the job. I tried to determine whether or not she was good at acting—the vibe I got, later confirmed by seeing her in a bit role in a Chekhov production, was no, she wasn't. Not on stage anyway. She balked when I asked about plays she'd been in, said the department wasn't great for undergrads, you know, all the roles went to grad students, and it was all very political, but she'd managed to have some supporting roles in plays I'd never heard of.

There's a strange disconnect with some people in theater—they're bad actors on stage, but they're good actors in real life. I don't mean to say that Clara was fake. But she came to the interview with a pantsuit and a polished demeanor, one that didn't quite match my Casual Friday tie-and-jeans combo and general lack of age and experience. It was as though I'd showed up for my part unprepared, but she was determined to see the play go on and feed me my lines. There was a certain charming naiveté about it. I tried to get her to loosen up by asking me to tell me about herself. What I got instead were her life plans. The girl had contingencies for contingencies. She was going to land a leading role in a Columbus play, through Ohio State or not. She was also studying for the LSAT now because she was going to law school at one of nine tier-one law schools (she named them all). After law school, she would pursue acting in New York for two years, after which, if she could not break into the industry, she would fall back on a career as a prosecuting attorney.

Clara was intrigued by my job description. I asked her if she wouldn't mind working exclusively weekends, potentially a lot of them, and she told me she didn't. She was tired of her current social scene, she said. She'd worked so hard to befriend her fellow theater majors, a noxiously tight-knit group, and then discovered they were a little catty.

"It was like being in high school again," she said. "But I'm not going to change my major because of the kids that are in it." I told her that showed perseverance, because that seemed like an interviewer thing to say. Her insistence on professionalism was inspiring me to new heights of it. And there was something else, too. Clara was a very attractive girl, but she didn't try flirting with me to get the job. She

dressed well and made herself up. She showed her attractiveness, but it was like she was keeping it, just barely, behind a locked door. I wondered if that door could be unlocked, given the right combination of circumstance.

“Well, thanks Clara,” I said, “I’ll be in touch.” When she left, I made some calls and cancelled the rest of my interviews. I had a team.

I felt, as never before, the shadow of what I sensed Hotchkins felt with his banker buddies downtown—that sense that, if nothing else, I had a purpose at work.

One thing I hadn’t anticipated on my return to college was my hatred of the students there. It came on in surges, in soaking waves. Once I had my job and my employees, it only increased. They hadn’t changed radically while I was away. They still shouted football slogans at each other like thinly veiled threats. They still argued to the point of violence over the rules of beer pong. They still abided by the North Face and hoodies dress code, they still were concerned primarily with the consumption method and rate of Bud Light and its cheaper cronies. But I’d spent the summer dressing in suits and drinking Heinekens at \$8 a bottle. I’d been on the verge of something these short-sighted, shotgunning clowns couldn’t imagine. Had I really been like these kids for four years? Had I really been so vapid, so uninteresting?

I realized that hating the customers wasn’t going to make for the best business plan. I ignored it and made the calls to Nadia and Clara that Thursday. I congratulated them on getting the job and arranged a training session/strategy meeting at my apartment Friday evening. For the meeting I purchased a vegetable platter and put a spread of Ignitions (it came in five different flavors) on display. As I peeled the plastic off the veggie dip, I was overcome by anxiety for my plan. Would Nadia and Clara get along? Would they take one sip of Ignition and run out the door? No, everything was going to be fine, I told myself. We were all going to love Ignition, and Nadia and Clara were going to become unlikely

friends. We could become an ethnically diverse group of best friends, a Breakfast Club for the 21st century. Clara could give Nadia a makeover.

Of course that never happened. We never became best friends. Were it not for the fact that our work was exclusively on weekends, I think none of us probably would have chosen to hang out with each other on Friday nights. But there was a strong bond that formed, partly composed of the strains of work, and partly, I think, loneliness.

The girls arrived, introductions were made, vegetables were eaten. When I felt the small talk dying away I brought our attention the Ignition cans. "This is our product," I told the girls, "and I think we have an ethical duty to try it before we sell it. Here."

Then cans were big, about the size of a tallboy of PBR. We cracked them open, made an awkward toast "to business," and took a reluctant first sip. I looked between the two of them in surprise. "Where's the bite?" I asked. I took another sip.

"Are you sure there's alcohol in this?" Clara asked. "Because I can't taste it."

"It tastes like soda from home," Nadia offered. "Vimto. They make it much sweeter over there."

"Yeah," Clara said. "This is really sweet."

And it really was—still is, if you can manage to get your hands on one. They have all but passed out of headlines today, but a little over a year after the first time I tried one, they were stirring up a roaring controversy locally and nationally, one that would eventually lead to their being banned. I think the main problem was that sweetness that completely covered the taste of booze, a sweetness that lied.

"Not to sound sexist or anything," I said, "but this drinkable, from a girl's perspective? Or would you rather go for the Smirnoff?"

"This is pretty good," said Clara. "I would definitely drink this." Nadia shrugged.

With each sip, however, that initial sweetness persisted so much it turned to something nasty. It reminded me of an article I'd read once about Pepsi, how it had beaten Coke in a taste challenge even

though Coke was widely considered the superior product. For the first sip, which was the only thing this contest allowed for, Pepsi was the more exciting drink with its citrusy sweetness, and Coke, with its subtler vanilla flavors, seemed bland in comparison. But Coke's flavor lasted for the entire can, whereas Pepsi, the more you drank it, just turned sticky-sweet in your mouth and left you desperate for a toothbrush.

When we were each about halfway through (Nadia, I think, drank only a fourth), we agreed to stop. The cans lent a phony party atmosphere to our icebreaking session, our teeth were in need of a good brushing, and we were all what Madison would have called "business drunk"—tipsy enough to laugh at others' bad jokes but not drunk enough to make any of your own.

"This stuff kicks in pretty quickly," Clara said, gulping down her last sip and grimacing.

"That's what Madison told me," I said. "It's stronger than all the competitors. Plus the flavors are an advantage. But yeah, that is strong. Jesus. You feel all right Nadia?"

Nadia had become quietly reflective on the end of the couch, with a faint smile playing at the corners of her lips. "Fine, thank you," she said, and I thought I heard a trace more of an accent coming through. We didn't realize it at the time, but it was her first experience with alcohol, and she was taking careful mental notes.

"I wonder... and maybe you two can help with the math... how much alcohol is in this stuff. Let's do some calculations here." I leapt up and grabbed a pen and paper. I felt buzzed but also giddy, which was unusual for me. I'd reached the age when unless I was doing consistently hard drinking, I'd start yawning after three beers. Ignition made me feel like I was getting drunk at fifteen again. It also, strangely, felt how I imagined cocaine would feel.

"So the alcohol content is... wow, twelve and a half percent. And most light beer is what, 3.2? And there are twelve ounces in a can, so... let's see..."

"Four beers," said Nadia, examining up the can. "The equivalent of four beers."

“So by drinking half the can, we just chugged two beers, basically, in about five minutes.” I smiled. “I think college kids are going to like this.”

We set our half-drunk cans aside and came up with some rules. If we hoped to be productive, we could not ourselves drink over half a can over the course of a night. That meant learning to pretend-drink, which is harder than you’d think. We discussed transport issues (bookbags full of the stuff). We discussed proper party-crashing etiquette and techniques. We discussed a system of targeting, which led to some near-uncomfortable conversation:

“It’s best for us, especially the two of you, to seek out the, I guess, less, um, cool guys at the party.”

“How come?” asked Clara

“Well.” I had to proceed carefully from here to avoid making the job seem like light prostitution. “Advertising is about creating a need. Ads do that by making you feel like you’re missing something. They make you vulnerable. So, you know. The uncool guys already feel vulnerable just by being at the party.”

“So you want us to flirt with them.”

“No. Well, yes. A little bit. Is that—I don’t know. Is it sexual harassment if I say that?”

“I think you’re OK, for now.”

We reached a consensus for a nightly goal. We felt that the three of us, starting at ten and ending at two, could go at a rate of a little over a party an hour. So, five parties per night. At each party, we could give out, between the three of us, Ignitions to five different party guests. So five parties per night, five guests per party, for a total of twenty-five new Ignition drinkers per night. Which might not sound like much. But let’s imagine, as we did at the time, that each drinker will tell one of his friends, just one, about it. That might be an overestimation, or it might be a conservative estimate. But if we say

it, that's fifty potential new Ignition drinkers in one night. One tenth of a percent of students that attend the University. But for three people, working on a campus of fifty thousand, it is quite an impact.

For obvious reasons, this isn't a story I tell to many people. Yet even today, I'll talk down anyone who tries to tell me we couldn't have made that much of an impact, to diminish our accomplishments. I did the math. All the literature at Ohio State talks about ways to "distinguish yourself" among your peers. This was just our way.

Next we engaged in some informal role-playing. I played the tough customer and the girls gave me the hard Ignition sell. Clara was unsure at first—she wanted a set script. When I told her to think of it as an improvisational sketch, one where the punch line is a guy drinking Ignition, she improved dramatically. She outperformed the suddenly shy Nadia, who stood back and recited the mathematical benefits of the drink. I told her she had the right idea, but the wrong delivery, and suggested that she be more aggressive. She took the suggestion to heart, because she all but forced the drink down my throat the next time.

When we felt we were role-played out, I tried to give a little pep talk. "Tomorrow is a game day," I told the girls. "People will be drinking all day. They'll be tired when it's time to go out, they'll need something to wake them up. That's where we'll come in."

"We're waiting until tomorrow?" Nadia asked, visibly disappointed.

"Do we have to?" asked Clara.

I felt a sudden surge of confidence. "Let's go out tonight," I said.

Anyone who's ever made a pitch in his life will know how quickly those initial bursts of enthusiasm can vanish when the time comes to actually perform. For the three of us, it was standing in front of a lawn on East Norwich, looking for all the work like three-fifths of the Scooby Doo gang on the verge of entering a haunted house. The party should need no description. OSU gear was everywhere: red jerseys, red cups. Fratty-looking guys played a drinking game with quarter on the porch. Inside, a

gravelly-voiced rapper sang about the acquisition of money and hoes. We exchanged no nervous glances. To look at one another would be to acknowledge each other's existence, to acknowledge the plan, and at the moment we wanted nothing more than for there to be no plan, no party, and no people, three of them, standing stupidly on a cracked off-campus sidewalk waiting for someone to make a move.

I really think one of us might have run off in a minute if I hadn't broken from our established protocol. Without looking at Nadia or Clara, I took out my phone and started an obnoxious, one-sided conversation with myself. "No! Did you say 117 or 107? I—no! Can you come out?" As I talked, I walked towards the house, and trusted the girls to follow behind.

I brushed past plaid shirts lingering at the door—"I can't hear you! You're where?"—skirted to the side of the makeshift living room dance floor, where guys in baseball caps groped their much-younger dance partners inappropriately in the dark—"You're in the back? By the keg?"—and found my way to the kitchen, where I nodded to the guests, phone still glued to ear, and asked the most authoritative guy present if I could "stash my shit" in the fridge. He just shrugged—not his house. Lucky. As I removed cans from my bag, one at a time, and placed them in the fridge, a guy in plaid shorts and a striped polo asked, "What is that, man?"

"This? Oh, it's Ignition," I said. "Ever try it?" He hadn't. "Here," I said, cracking one open, "have one."

"You sure?" Booze is plentiful at state schools, and especially Ohio State—I once heard we drank enough liquor, annually, to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool—but they way guys clutch cans to their chests, you'd think Miller was as rare as water in the Sahara. The offering of free drinks between guys—where was the benefit?—was, to say the least, uncommon.

“Sure man,” I said. “They’re cheap.” I went on in what I thought was an unnaturally loud voice, trying to promote to drink without sounding like a Stepford husband. “I always bring so many, but I only need one or two. They’re pretty strong.”

“It doesn’t taste that strong.”

“Wait for it,” I said. “You’ll feel it.” I was right—as we left, that same kid was standing in the kitchen, dancing by himself to the rap from the other room. A daring kid in tight jeans piped up and asked for an Ignition, since I was giving them out, and a girl in a cut-off Brutus T-shirt asked if she could sip from Plaid Shorts’ can.

“Thanks man,” said the shorts guy. “So who do you know here?”

“No one, actually,” I said, and a couple of my new friends exchanged alarmed glances. “But my friend Clara does. She should be—oh, there she is.”

Clara had just made it to the kitchen with Nadia. They were both smiling and holding open cans of Ignition.

I can’t emphasize enough what a textbook first run it was. There were other parties that went smoothly, that we were actually sad to leave because we were having fun with strangers, but none of them went as well as that first Friday night. I don’t want to make it seem like we were the Wedding Crashers in there, throwing out free cans of Ignition while the crowd cheered our names, but we were, for the most part, treated well, with minimum suspicion. The appearance of two attractive girls does a lot to minimize scrutinizing questions. When we left, having given a third of our Ignition stash away, our faces were flushed like we’d just run a marathon, or shotgunned a beer. We gave ecstatic high-five-hugs, congratulated each other on our brilliant performances. It was the honeymoon stage of work, the first night when you come home with nothing to complain about and the knowledge that that first paycheck will be on its way soon. We all should have known it couldn’t last.

For the next night, and the next five weeks of that quarter, we worked our way south to Chittenden, north to Patterson, then back south again. We wrote down every address—even with friendly parties, we never hit the same house twice. We never quite recaptured the alchemy of that first night. It was a one-time deal, we knew that, but it was not a fluke. It was a result of a chemistry we naturally possessed but needed constant work to strengthen its bonds. We had brief, weekly planning sessions on Thursdays, but on the job is where the greatest training occurred. On the job is where we learned the finer points of salesmanship without selling: the hard sell and soft sell, as well as a few I think we must have invented. We developed a reliable system for demographics: Nadia, the nice one, targeted the worst-looking guys at the party, lowering their defenses with a disarming smile and an offered drink. Clara, the tease, targeted the medium-to-good-looking guys. I, on my good days, worked small crowds like Professor Harold Hill (Mom's weakness was old Broadway musicals) bringing trombones from Wells Fargo.

Halloween happened a few weeks into our business venture. I think it is interesting to note the volumes that a costume can speak about its wearer. If you remember one national event from 2008, I imagine it might be that year's historic election. If you remember two events from that year, it will be the election and going to see the Batman movie. High Street reflected these events accordingly and was filled with leering, white-faced Jokers, the lot of them confused that they were not the only ones who'd had the costume idea. Clara's costume was a popular one among girls that year.

"Whatcha think?" she asked. She'd shown up to my apartment in glasses, hair up, wearing a pantsuit over a remarkably low-cut top.

"Are you a sexy librarian or something?" I asked.

"No, dontcha know," she said, and pulled a balled-up sash from her purse that read 'Miss Alaska 2008.' "I'm Sexy Sarah Palin!"

It is a testament to her acting abilities that she nailed those nasal northern tones completely. There was a resemblance in Clara to that year's Trophy Veep I had not noticed until that moment, and perversely, it made me more attracted to her.

"You two look great," said Nadia, arriving right behind Clara. She was a witch, not a sexy witch, but a traditional one, complete with pointed hat, long robes, even a broom with green brushes. I couldn't remember seeing a girl in a costume like it since eighth grade. There was something almost heart-breaking about seeing it on her.

"So what are you supposed to be?" she asked me, smiling.

"I was wondering that myself," said Clara.

"Come on, guys," I said. "Who else in the world won eight gold medals?" I thought I was being both topical and clever by dressing as that year's leading Olympian Michael Phelps, an outfit complete with a real Speedo swimsuit and a six-pack I'd achieved mostly through starvation.

I had to remind them of Phelps' achievements to jog their memory. "If you're Michael Phelps, where are your biceps?" asked Clara.

"And your goggles?" added Nadia.

Most reactions that night were similar. My cleverness had backfired. Phelps, so prolific in August of that year, is nearly forgotten now, and in ten years I'll look back at digital photo albums and ask myself, Who the hell were you supposed to be. I should have picked a better costume— I haven't dressed up for Halloween since, and now that I'm approaching 25, I doubt that I ever will again.

Halloween was stretched to a four-day affair, and we worked overtime, performing several successful "hit-and-runs" (as we had come to call our operations) and trying a couple "drive-bys" (leaving bottles of Ignition in the fridge and leaving before we could be spotted by the hosts).

It seemed, at that time, that everyone had something to sell. The Oval is Ohio State's massive take on the old quadrangle, used most often for Frisbee-tossing and tanning, but that fall it was a

hotbed of political activity. The Obama kids worked the Oval with zeal, shouting slogans and exchanging high-fives with strangers, and the McCain crowd, sorely outnumbered, clustered together and tensed whenever you approached them. The Youth, those fickle customers, were not on their side that year, and if my life had gone differently, I may have been in their corner, clad in the Young Republicans' khaki and blazer uniform. But advertising, not politics, was my calling—such is life.

As November 5th drew closer, the Obama kids' energy increased while the McCain camp seemed only to grow more despondent. There was this kid who favored plaid blazers staffing the McCain table almost every time I passed who looked particularly sad. I recognized him from the one political science course I'd taken in undergrad. He'd been a very outspoken fellow, and he'd alienated more than a few of my classmates. I should have gone over and at least said hello, but some form of ennui, some inertia of the soul, stopped me.

Election Day came, and the results, a surprise to no one, sent students jumping into the man-made campus lake in celebration. I had cast a half-hearted vote for McCain, in some ways just to convince myself that I was different from the freshmen in my classes with Obama stickers, somehow more mature. I wasn't angry at the results—happy college voters meant drinking and celebration that weekend. Of course it was not without its irksome repercussions.

“Woo! Hope and change!” It was Thursday in November, the first night after the election, and Clara Hines was stumbling on heels, barely keeping up with Nadia and I and not pulling half her weight in marketing. Clara had been out drinking that evening, claiming she'd forgotten we'd be working. She was a Democrat who'd come out of the woodwork the past few days, and her fair-weather fandom was the best illustration of what annoyed me most in the Obama camp.

I rolled my eyes and turned to Nadia, who had been quieter than usual. “Did you vote for him too?” I asked. We were working the luka neighborhood that evening. “You can tell me. Promise I don't care enough to fire you.” It didn't occur to me until I asked that she might think I was making my

assumption based on the widespread rumor that the President-Elect was a secret Muslim, a rumor whose very existence carried ugly connotations, and I once again feared I'd offended her.

But apparently she had thought nothing of the rumor. She shook her head. "I didn't vote," she told me.

I turned toward her. "Really?" It had been in vogue to take a strong stance on the election one way or another that year, and hers was an admission I had not heard once in the last twenty-four hours.

"I have lived here nine years," she said. "But it has never really been home."

"I see." could relate, or at least I thought I could: as I looked at the students around me with increasing contempt, I was realizing that this school, a place I'd identified with pride the past five years (it's never not THE Ohio State University), had never been a home to me either. It couldn't be, not when I was so transient: freshman year I lived in a colorless dorm room decorated with posters to show my individuality (mine, and everyone else's, were bought at the same tent sale). I spent my next three years moving between houses without history: none of the previous tenants had lived there more than two years or left anything behind more interesting than Campbell's soup cans.

"Part of me has always thought I'd go back to Syria," she went on. "My family is there, my childhood friends are there."

"The boyfriend, too," I added. "That must be pretty serious." I understand how this could be construed as flirtation, but in my mind, it was friendly curiosity, conversation among coworkers.

"He's a friend of my dad's family," she said. "It keeps him happy that I'm dating a Muslim. And in his mind, the less we see of each other before we're married, the better."

"Married?" I was alarmed. I couldn't help it. Marriage was a concept as inconceivable to me, at that age, as getting a heart attack, and about as frightening.

"That's what he wants," she said. "Him and my dad."

“What do you want?” I asked, but Nadia had stopped walking, and from the way she held out her hands to steady herself, it looked as though she was about to faint.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“I just need to sit,” she said. She handed me her can of Ignition, barely a fourth finished, and sat on a front lawn tree stump surrounded by beer cans. She put her head in her hands.

“Oh, Nadia, honey? What’s wrong?” Clara had caught up to us by now, and she kneeled, precariously, to examine Nadia. She usually didn’t start getting friendly with Nadia until about half a can, and nights when she had a full one she could get downright handsy with her.

“What’s the date, the sixth?” I asked. “Shit, Nadia, have you eaten today?”

“Oh no, is it, what is it, Ramadan?” asked Clara. “Is that today?”

“It lasts a month,” I snapped. “Nadia, did you get to eat before work?”

“I had a Pop-Tart,” she said.

“Jesus,” I said. “We’re done for the night. Nadia, you need some food.”

A few minutes later we were at PJ’s, the preferred eatery for night owls, the obese, and the intoxicated. Employee T-shirts read, proudly, “Home of the Drunks.” PJ’s abides by the same two-in-one philosophy that drove Ignition, but they elevate the art: you can get fries, buffalo tenders, ranch dressing, and jalapeno poppers, all in the same heart-stopping sandwich. The place is, at least, unabashed about their fare: every sandwich name is pre-fixed by ‘Fat.’ Clara was schmoozing with some fake friends from the theater department we’d ran into, so Nadia and I were alone for a moment at our booth.

“This is delicious,” she said between mouthfuls of sandwich. She had ordered the ‘Fat Gyro,’ the only sandwich on the menu that contained lamb. “Lamb is the traditional way to break the fast,” she explained. She was giddy from hunger, more talkative and animated than I had ever seen her.

“You didn’t have one lying around your apartment?”

She laughed. "I won't let it happen again."

"I'm not mad," I said, "I'm glad you're alive. Next time, eat. You can come late." I smiled. "And for God's sake, stock up your pantry."

"I will," she said, and took another bite.

"Let me ask you a question," I said. "You are Islamic, you're, um, a Muslim."

"It's not a bad word," she said.

"I know," I said, though I had said it quick and under my breath like it was. "So you're a Muslim, but you don't wear the uh, scarf, on your head."

"I don't wear the *hijab*, no," she said.

"So," I said. "Why is that?"

"I used to," she said. "I still will at home, or on special occasions. My mother encouraged me to try not wearing it, actually. She likes to think we're 'modern.' My father, though." She laughed. "He's very traditional."

"Is that why you don't drink?"

"There is a devil in every berry of the grape," she said.

"Wow," I said. "I think I just got chills."

She laughed. "That's the Koran." Her face became more serious. "For me though, it was my sister. She started drinking in college, and she messed up. Instead of being in med school now, she works as my dad's receptionist. That's why I'm on the three-year plan: Father wants me out of college as fast as possible."

"But you have to drink a little, on the job. And that one time, on the first day, you were maybe a little drunk."

She shrugged. "If you are going to truly understand a culture, you have to engage in its rituals." The struggles of those transplanted from their homelands at any age has been written about by people

with Ph.Ds smarter and more poetic than I could ever hope to be. What I will say is that while Nadia's interest was academic, it may also have appealed to her just being another college girl on a Friday night, even if it was only pretend. And if that made her happy, it was the best thing I ever did for her.

"Now let me ask you a question," she said. "How did you know it was Ramadan?"

I smiled. She had caught me. "Nadia," I said, "I'm offended you even asked. I am a paragon of knowledge of other cultures."

"Bullshit," she said. It was the only time I ever heard her curse. She laughed. "Did you have cultural sensitivity training on Wikipedia or something?"

That was, in fact, exactly what I had done. "If I'd done that," I said, "I would know that you can't eat my sandwich, because it has bacon in it."

She considered this. "I have never tried bacon," she said. With that she reached forward, tore off a corner of my sandwich, and placed it in her mouth. She contemplated it for a second. Her eyes lit up. "This is delicious," she said.

"Another American cultural landmark," I said. "What next?"

Clara was stumbling back to our table. Nadia placed her finger to her lips. "Our secret," she said.

I thought, at that time, that this was the normal interaction between men and women who are friends at the workplace. I realized later that it had been years since I'd had a friendship with a girl that wasn't staked on a hope for sex. I thought interactions between Nadia and me were harmless, our jokes and our smiles friendly and pure, but that was before I knew that it was in my nature to do harm.

The three of us, it turned out, were developing an odd sort of bond. We never arranged to hang out outside of party-hopping and our weekly meetings, but our group dynamic wasn't made of the curt, matter-of-fact interactions that characterized other jobs I'd had. When we ran into each other on campus or on High Street, we beamed, yelled to each other wearing shit-eating grins. Some hard

Saturdays, when work was over we hardly wanted to look at each other anymore, but we knew that once the week began we'd be looking forward to Friday again.

We got to know more about one another, the kind of information that tends to come out under trace amounts of alcohol and long walks at night across the University District. Clara, it turns out, could sing like a diva when moved to do so. She'd had, it turned out, a string of boyfriends in the theater program, three of them assholes and one of them recently bisexual, and that may have contributed to her isolation inside the department. Nadia spoke no more of her boyfriend, but I was right in thinking she could perform a spot-on impression of her stern Syrian father.

Me, I told them wild stories about my New York internship and my douchey friends from business school. I never went deeper than that. It would have taken more than a few sips of Ignition to get my started on my parents, or my views on relationships, and besides, I wanted to maintain some wall of professionalism, some vestige of the employer-employee relationship. I didn't know that soon, the imagined barrier of that relationship would come crashing down around me.

An important part of the job involved contingencies and exit strategies. The exits were particularly important. The lasting afterglow of our first victory was enough to get us through a lot of exits, some graceful, some frightening. Often kids would give us searching looks, or probe passive-aggressively: "So how did you say you knew Nick again?" This was enough of a cue to leave. Some kids calmly asked us to leave if we couldn't find who we were looking for, and we departed without complaint. On more than one occasion we left with shouted threats at our backs. The low point came from a thick-armed renter at a house on Lane Avenue who brought our night to a grinding halt. Nadia and Clara were being delayed by a fat-faced kid who insisted they play a round of quarters on the porch, and when the muscle man cornered me in the kitchen and asked who I knew, I couldn't pull my line with its usual bravado.

"You don't know anyone," he said. "Is that what you're saying?"

"No one, not really. Do you think you could introduce me to the host or something?"

"You can introduce yourself to the fucking street."

"Oh."

"Yeah. See you later."

I walked onto the porch, balls in stomach, and motioned to the girls that it was time to go. That was the last weekend before Thanksgiving. I told them we'd had a good night but I was tired. "Finals are next week," I said as we walked toward High Street. "I think this would be a good night to end on for the quarter. I've got papers to write, and I'm sure you two are busy."

They agreed, reluctantly. "We'll have to celebrate when we're done with finals though," said Clara. "A Christmas party." She glanced at Nadia. "Or, you know, a holiday party, of some kind."

Nadia smiled. "A Christmas party would be wonderful," she said. "With a tree. And holly."

We had the Christmas party at my apartment because I lived alone and was able to drag from my parents' basement the oldest fake evergreen in Central Ohio. I told them they could invite friends if they wanted, but both showed up alone. "I'm going to the airport soon," was Nadia's excuse, "I'm just staying for a little while anyway," was Clara's. She was lying. I felt bad for those two until I considered that I hadn't invited any of my classmates, old or new. It's possible that due to the strange nature of our work, the three of us were closer to each other, or could at least stand each other more, than anyone else that we knew.

We drank eggnog (spiked for Clara and me, virgin for Nadia) and listened to Clara's Boyz II Men Christmas album. By nine o'clock we were already drunk on nostalgia, laughing over nineties boy bands and explaining them to Nadia as best we could. Nadia had to leave early to catch a flight back to Syria. Clara and I offered to drive her to the airport a hundred times, but she assured us her sister was picking her up. When Nadia left, things got a little tense between me and Clara, sexually, so we went to a nearby bar to relieve it.

"I have four roommates," she confided over a Christmas Ale (one thing I'll say for Clara: she had good taste in booze, outside of work), "and I don't like any of them." The bar was full of college students holding off on going home as long as possible. On the jukebox, Billy Joel sang something about sharing a drink called loneliness. Or maybe it was lowliness—I could never tell, and I never bothered to look it up.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"They're here for an MRS degree," she said, twirling her napkin. "All they do is complain about school. They have no plans for the future. How can they not know how important college is?"

I shrugged. "Not everyone's got their whole lives planned out. Not like you, anyway."

She laughed. "Nadia is so pretty," she said. "I think she's beautiful. Do you think she's pretty?"

I nodded, noncommittal. "She is pretty."

"Do you think *I'm* pretty?" She batted her eyelashes. They were long and furred. Clara was being more unsubtle than I'd ever seen her—even drunk, she'd never been this openly flirtatious.

Beer was going to my head. "I think you're a fox." I'd drunk myself bold, and Clara, my coworker, was turning me on with her eyelashes, her chest-hugging Christmas sweater. I now suspect that this too was part of her act. It worked for guys at parties, and it was working on me. Seduction was her most—maybe her only—convincing role.

She laughed. "You and I aren't like most people here." She leaned over, spoke into my ear. "We're going places." She leaned back. "Where do you see yourself in five years? Running an agency on Madison Avenue?"

Now I was drunk and sad. "I thought I did." I explained, briefly, my missed opportunity for greatness in New York. "I'm here now because I failed in advertising."

"No Miles, don't say that. You've done great work here!"

She was right. Madison was traveling to major cities and college towns, starting on the complicated process of going national, so he was tough to get a hold of. But I was seeing Ignition bottles

crushed on High Street—I counted four one morning. When I overheard a freshman in my Brit Lit class tell his friend he’d “got hammered off an Ignition” two nights before, I had to excuse myself to shout “Fuck yes” in the men’s room.

“Thanks Clara. I guess some stuff just happens.”

On that profound line we closed our tabs and went back to my apartment. That was the first time I slept with Clara, the first time I’d slept with anyone during my quarter of occasionally interrupted loneliness. And I wouldn’t have done it, except I was drunk, and it was Christmastime, and Christmas in college always made me sad about some damn thing or other. If I’d been thinking clearly I would have considered the warning signs: sordid history with men, few friends in the theater department, no friends at her apartment. If I would have known the damage I’d cause—well, let’s face it, I probably would have slept with her anyway. But I would have given it a lot more thought.

The first week of break was the most relaxed I’d spent at home in a while. My parents were so happy with my new major, and so satisfied with the recent Obama win, that we held off on arguing until Madison returned to Columbus and the full description of my job was disclosed. It wasn’t as bad as it could have been—I was getting paid, after all, I had been resourceful and found a job, made a job, actually, at a time when many were without, and in the end that outweighed any moral scruples my parents had. Besides, my mom had been so inspired by the crisis that she was revising and adding several chapters to her book, now with the working title *Hard Times: Dickens in the Post-Globalized Economy*. Now when she referenced *A Christmas Carol*, at least it was in season.

I power-lunched with Madison as soon as he was free to give him a full report on our activities. He looked tired from his travels, but sounded optimistic. He felt that in a weakened economy, people needed quick, cheap ways to get drunk, and he was sure that Ignition could meet that need, nationally. He wanted to know about my advertising strategy, but first, he wanted to know about my co-workers.

“Hired a couple of babes, I bet. Are you banging ‘em?”

“What? No,” I said quickly.

“That’s probably good,” he said. “Wouldn’t work out well for anybody.”

I cleared my throat. “Have you noticed a change in sales?”

“There’s been some change. Not astronomic leaps, mind you, but there’s definitely been a raise since the summer. I might even call it a spike.”

“Due to the hardworking efforts of your cousin and his amazing ad team.”

“Don’t go asking for a raise yet, cuz. Most of the spike can be accounted for by kids moving back on campus. But. I think you guys are doing good work on a micro level. It never hurts to have three good-looking people giving out your product. I’m gonna need you over the winter now. There’ll be less drinking at bars, more drinking indoors. Kids want to forget it’s winter in Ohio. Ignition will help.”

“And those are the kind of lines that get you ahead in advertising.”

“Advertising’s overrated. Booze rules. Now listen,” he said, putting his silverware down and pushing his plate aside. “You’ve really impressed me this year. You took initiative, your showed interest. You showed balls, cuz. I could use a man like you in the company.”

“You have me in the company,” I said, surprising myself. Three months ago I would have licked the Ignition off the bottom of his shoes to have this conversation. Now, I was enjoying my current role in the company so much that I wanted to keep it.

“Jeremy’s in trouble again. Got an OVI. If he keeps making headlines like this, I’m gonna need a new partner soon.”

I involuntarily slid back my chair. It squeaked angrily.

“Check your heart rate, cuz. I can’t bring you in as a partner. I’d have to bump up some other guy. But that other guy would leave a vacant slot in a higher-than-entry-level position, if you know what I mean.”

“I think I do.”

“Good. Keep your scam running, cuz, and you could have your own office at Ignition before the school year ends.”

After my conversation with Madison, I was anxious to get back to work. Against my mom’s half-hearted protests, I moved, after the annual Cantor household New Year’s party where I was actually able to discuss Fitzgerald and Modernism (still didn’t touch the hummus), back to my apartment on New Year’s Day. I tried to think up new strategies for the winter months, but all I could come up with was ‘stick to our guns’. I was worried relations with Clara would be strained at best. I hadn’t talked to her except for a text or two over the break. I needn’t have worried. Clara played the role of the casual, detached, lover, and that entire first month back she never broke character.

The relationship that was in more immediate danger of changing was the one with Nadia. She had returned from Syria a single woman. Her boyfriend had not approved of her job. It entailed running around with American men, who were pigs, and American women, also pigs, or *sharlmuttat* (a term Nadia refused to translate), and consuming alcohol, even trace amounts of which were *haram*. Nadia told him in return that her job was fun, and also, she was going to graduate school, and if he did not approve of that they should break up. In a rage, he obliged. Nadia’s older sister had taken a renewed interest in Nadia’s social life now that she was single. They’d had taken a girls’ day of pampering and makeovers together upon Nadia’s return, and when I saw her again she took my breath away. It was her eye make-up, I think. She was done up in pencil to have those eyes you see on the walls of Egyptian tombs. She looked like Cleopatra.

“You look great,” I told her.

If her skin had been less tan, she might have blushed. “We were just fooling around,” she murmured, “my sister and me.”

I repeated Madison’s warning to myself and refrained from further compliments. We had work to do, and with my impending promotion it was more serious than ever.

The spike in the seriousness of our work happened to coincide with a sharp decline in its fun. It could be attributed to a number of factors: the unacknowledged sexual tension between me and Nadia, the unacknowledged sexual congress between me and Clara, the five inches of snow every week and the sub-zero wind chills. Mostly, I think, it was the lack of quality and ease in our work that made the difference. Dormitory posters all over campus warned about seasonal depression, but I think that's just an excuse for people to be mean. When people party in winter, they leave the doors closed. Students who would have welcomed us with an O-H! in the fall shut the door in our faces in winter. It was much easier to get discouraged in the cold—the second Saturday of January, a night of record-low temperatures for that date, we didn't give out a single can.

Valentine's Day fell on a weekend that year. None of us were too happy about it: Clara had gone on an ill-matched and horribly timed date that Wednesday, and by Friday was upset he hadn't called her. Because of this she had convinced herself she'd never find a boyfriend before she graduated. I was mechanically jealous about Clara's date, and annoyed at myself for being jealous. Also I was pissed about the holiday in the general way many single males in America feel entitled to. Nadia felt she had missed out on the best years of the holiday, the elementary school years when everyone got cards from everyone, no matter what. We'd met for drinks at my apartment before going out (Nadia had hot chocolate, Clara and I had hot toddies), and Clara and I told her she hadn't missed much. We shared stories of our teenage Valentine embarrassments. But our reminiscing was joyless, all badly-timed breakups and "I sent Lillian Sanders flowers and she didn't even look at the card." We went out into the cold with memories of broken adolescent hearts feeling strangely present and heavy.

We were in the northern University District that night, and to our surprise found a fairly receptive party. The crowd was so mixed, consisting of hipsters, bros, and short guys that had the look of professional video gamers, that no one could keep track of who knew who, or whose party it actually

was. We thrived in this environment, befriending strangers quickly and sharing our sugary drinks. It would have been our most successful night of the quarter if things hadn't soured so fast.

This is what Clara told me: Nadia approached a pale, high-strung looking kid in a plaid blazer, and offered him an Ignition not realizing he was already drinking it. It was the same downcast kid I had seen staffing the McCain table in November. "I'm good, thanks," he said, holding up his can, his demeanor making it clear that he was well into his second. "Question though," he said, "you must have been pretty excited about the inauguration last month. Am I right?"

Nadia was baffled. She didn't realize what the kid was getting at. She tried, in classic Nadia form, to list the benefits of Ignition, but Plaid Blazer interrupted. "I mean, it's like, all right, we've got one in the White House now, huh? You snuck one by us."

A hush was seeping slowly over the room at this point, as it does when a scene is about to be made. I sensed something was up when I heard him saying, "He says he's going to close Guantanamo, so maybe that'll be good for you and your family."

I don't have a clear memory of running across the room, but I must have in order to push him. Keep in mind that pushing a kid at a college party is tantamount to throwing a punch in a movie—things start happening fast. Two kids apiece were pulling us apart, and I was shouting threats I hadn't used since high school. "Fucking fascist!" is the one I remember yelling, mostly because, as I realized later, that one was usually directed at me, not the other way around.

We left quickly after that. To my surprise, my righteous anger dissipated to righteousness almost as soon as we hit the night air. I started laughing, and the girls, though still shaken, laughed too. "Come on," I said, "let's call it a night. Back to my place."

Nadia, then, did something Nadia almost never did: she threw her arms around me in an unrestrained hug. "Thank you," she said. I made some joke about hating guys in plaid blazers. I wondered, as we walked back, if my feelings were protective ones, or something else entirely.

By the time we got to Grandview my shove had been upgraded to an epic tale of valor. I got to hear some excellent impressions of me shouting at Plaid Blazer. It was almost too late to buy any booze, and we were too tired to walk anywhere else, so we used what we had: we split the last five Ignitions three ways. Pretty soon we were engaged in the short-term nostalgia that passes for fond memories in college, going over the greatest hits of our covert marketing careers of the past five months. At some point I cracked open my second Ignition, which is where memory starts to get a little unreliable. I know it came up that Nadia had never played Kings, the drinking game, and Clara and I were outraged at this injustice, that Nadia had been excluded from this most vital part of American college culture. So we got a deck of cards and started Kings, only to realize Nadia had never played Never Have I Ever, so of course we had to switch to that.

When it became apparent we were embarrassing Nadia, the game devolved, stupidly, into a game of Spin the Bottle. I can't remember who suggested it, but I have my reasons to suspect it was Clara. I seem to remember—and here I curse fragile memory—a brief moment when my lips touched Nadia's, only to be kissing empty air before I could slip in tongue. This could also come from any number of guilty dreams I had in the weeks that followed. What I definitely remember is this: making out with Clara, who was straddling me on the floor, and seeing Nadia, when I opened my eyes, creeping towards the door. I did actually take my tongue out of Clara's mouth to say "Nadia—" but she was already out the door. Did I push Clara off then, did I run down the hall to catch Nadia? Of course I didn't.

My first regret the next morning was that I hadn't brushed my teeth—I could feel the sugar from two Ignitions slowly melting my enamel away. My next two regrets, respectively, were the girl in bed next to me, and the girl who had left. Clara was still asleep (a late sleeper, and a snorer), and the only thing I could think might make me less miserable was to clean the apartment. I dumped the opened Ignition cans into the sink and threw them out. I picked up the stray articles of clothing Clara and I had

left strewn about my den. I drank a glass of water. Around ten thirty, Clara came slouching from my bedroom.

“See you at work this Thursday?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I guess so.”

I didn’t see her or Nadia that Thursday. Nadia’s absence I had expected (I’d left two apologetic voicemails before 1. remembering how bad she was about checking messages and 2. realizing that nothing I said could fix what I’d done), but Clara, I had thought, would endeavor to reclaim her role as the Queen of Casual Sex. Instead I got a halfhearted phone call forty-five minutes after our meeting was supposed to begin.

“Listen,” she said. “This is weird.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“When you say that, are you saying we should date?”

“Well... no. No, I’m not.”

“OK. That’s fine. Probably for the best, actually. That guy? From last week? He called me a couple days ago, and I think he wants to be my boyfriend, so... yeah. Probably for the best.”

“Certainly appears that way.”

“Then I guess I... I respectfully, you know... tender...”

“I get it. Thanks for letting me know.”

Soon as I got off the phone with Clara, I left the café and called Madison.

“There’s been a slight setback,” I told him. “I need to do some hiring. But it shouldn’t take more than a week, two weeks tops.”

“That’s OK,” he said. “You know what? Don’t bother.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Haven’t you heard? Sales are up. Waaay up. Turns out Jeremy’s press was not bad press. Not entirely anyway. It made some investors anxious, but it called so much attention to the product that sales have like, quadrupled in the past month. I didn’t tell you?”

“No,” I said through gritted teeth. “You didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, looks like Jeremy is here to stay. Which is great for business, but, you know. Sad for you. Sorry about that.”

“Right,” I said. “What about covert marketing?”

“Um, now that we’ve got a budget, we’re doing marketing-marketing. So...yes, that ship has sailed. But you did well, kid. Tell you what. We’re going to have to expand soon, and fast. There are plenty of other college towns out there. You ever thought about moving to Tempe? Or we could keep you fairly local—Athens, maybe? Parties are great at OU.”

“Madison,” I said, “I have to finish school.”

“Screw school, dude. It’s for the weak. I’ve got some great entry-level positions—”

I closed my phone.

The next four weeks were like a string of run-on sentences about loneliness punctuated by soft-core pornography and drinks alone at Treacher’s. It was the second time I’d felt like this in a year—first the McCann fuck-up, then Ignition. This time there were no great ideas to snap me out of it. I’d just about had my fill of great ideas.

I would have felt better if Ignition was tanking without me and my marketing efforts, but what I had started—or believed I started—could not be stopped. I didn’t go to parties anymore, but I couldn’t walk down High Street without seeing a crushed Ignition can in every gutter. Every convenience store I entered had a pyramid of them on display, usually set off by a cut-out of a busty woman with the name of Madison’s company stretched across her chest. I thought that Treacher’s would be a safe haven until I

overheard, at the next table over, a group of underclassmen using obvious fake IDs try to order one with their dinner.

Without work, I was without friends. I could have made attempts at making friends in class—I was into upper-level English now, and my classmates were closer to my age—but the ennui I'd felt in the fall had taken full hold, and each afternoon I walked out of Denney Hall alone. I thought some nights of calling Clara, but I'd always stop myself. At the time I thought it was pride. Now I think it may have been an instinct for damage control, that maybe, even, I was trying to do us both a kindness.

Finally I decided to give Turner Hotchkins a call. I had made a verbal commitment to grab drinks with him again but had been blowing him off since mid-October. He met me at Treacher's, where I had been making "haunt" a literal term: I felt and looked pale and spectral.

Hotchkins noticed. "You've lost weight," he said. Despite his best efforts, it didn't come out as a compliment. I had lost five pounds on the Miles Cantor Guilt Diet, but instead of looking fit, I looked emaciated.

"Haven't been myself lately," I said, which was really the opposite of the problem: I *had* been, unbearably, myself. For what happened, there was no one else, not even Madison, to blame.

"The guys at work have been asking about you," he said. "They had fun when we went out that one time, we should do it again."

"Yeah, we should," I said, thinking that if what Hotchkins said was true, I may have been the only friend he'd brought out for a drink. I wondered then if Hotchkins was as lonely as I was.

"I told them I haven't been able to get a hold of you," said Hotchkins, tapping his card on the bar. "First round's on me. What have you been up to?"

What had I been up to, besides giving away drinks to college students, most of whom were probably underage? "I just got real tied up in work," I said. "Worked a lot of weekends. All weekends, actually."

"I'm glad you found work," he said. "Who with?"

"No one, anymore," I said. "I got fired. Actually, I quit."

"I'm sorry to hear it. What happened?"

The bartender brought over a pitcher. She didn't even have to ask me which kind. "Let's have a couple of these," I said, "and talk about it."

So I told him everything: my unsavory business plan, my unprofessional behavior, my falling out with Madison. Hotchkins seemed most curious about the women involved. "Have you heard from Nadia since?" he asked.

"I've been too embarrassed to call her," I told him.

"Why was she so upset about what happened?"

"I don't know," I said, despondent on three beers and sipping whisky. I didn't want to say aloud the possibility: that there had been something between us, however subtle and unacknowledged, and that I had taken it and smashed it to atoms.

"What about the other one, Clara," he said. "Would you pursue anything with her?" He was following my case with the intense interest of someone who has little or no sex life to speak of on their own. But then, I thought, I was happy to have someone to help sift through the rubble I'd left in my wake.

"You remember that old game 'Bang, Marry, Kill?'" I asked. We'd spent many nights playing it with our floor-mates in the dorm in the hours past two AM. It was stupid and sophomoric, but sometimes you could learn a lot about a man from the three he picked. "Clara is the girl you bang." I took a sip of beer. "She might even be the girl you kill."

"So Nadia's the one you marry, then?"

"Not me," I said. Because I was three drinks in and sensed more were coming, I told him something I had been turning over in my head the past few weeks. "I'm not a good guy, Turner."

“What are you talking about?” he said. “You’re smart. You’re fun to hang around with.”

“I sleep with girls, and do not call them after. That’s not what good guys do. And everyone from school was like that—Feldman, Fogelberg, all of them. I went to college with a bunch of assholes. Except you, Hotchkins,” I quickly added. “You had the right idea.”

“It seemed like you had fun at the time.” Hotchkins seemed vested in convincing me my hedonism had not been in vain. Back when we lived together, and I’d stumble back to our room at three in the morning, half the time he’d be at his desk reading. Instead of being mad at the interruption, he would ask me, with genuine interest, about the party. It was as though he was partying vicariously through me.

“No, I think you had the right idea, staying in and reading. I’m not kidding.”

“I missed out on a lot of stories,” he said.

“It was always the same story. Some asshole gets laid. So-and-so passed out. It was interchangeable. It was meaningless.”

“I missed out on a lot of girls,” he said.

“The ones you meet at parties, Hotchkins, are not the ones you want to meet,” I said. “Don’t get down on yourself. I’m sure there were some.”

He was quiet for a moment. “There was one,” he said. “Philosophy club. An Objectivist.”

“A girlfriend?”

“Almost,” he said. He looked sad about it still.

I wasn’t sure how to ask the next question. It wasn’t something I’d ask of anyone else in the whole business school. “Did you love her?”

He stared at the bar mirror, or past it. “I don’t know,” he said. “How can you tell?”

I thought for a moment. “I have no idea.”

There was nothing to say for a while, nothing to do but swirl our glasses, rattle our ice. Hotchkins was the one to break the mood. "Hey," he said. "This is too heavy for a Friday night. You've got spring break coming up. You have travel plans?"

I hadn't even considered spring break. I couldn't imagine life extending itself beyond the upcoming finals week. I knew no one was going to invite me to the Panhandle, the usual spring break spot for Central Ohioans, and a week alone in my apartment, without work to distract me, sounded unbearable. "I need a break from myself," I said.

"No more of that," Hotchkins said, placing a shot in front of me. "Let's forget about this stuff. Down the hatch."

There were more of these, and more conversation, but I hadn't eaten much before we went out, and memory fails me after our third round of shots. I remember debating, entirely too loud, the merits of a recent film with Hotchkins, and then, like a movie, the sound cuts out, then the picture. I woke up in my apartment the next morning not remembering how I'd arrived. Hotchkins tells me that he had to practically carry me from the bar to my apartment. Apparently I was muttering, over and over again, "I have wasted my entire life."

In the midst of a blinding hangover that next morning, hating myself and hating alcohol worse, I decided to do something I hadn't done all year: I decided to go home. Spring break would be better spent with my parents than spent alone.

It turned out they had plans. "We're doing an alternative spring break," Mom said, "right here in Columbus. Would you like to come?"

I'd heard about alternative spring breaks as far back as high school, and to my knowledge they were trips where you built things and everyone cried at the end. Also, you couldn't drink.

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

This alternative break was not about building things, but about the homeless, whose numbers in Columbus had increased dramatically since the financial collapse. Don't let anyone ever tell you that Columbus is much nicer than the other Ohio cities. It may seem that way driving through the Short North and the Arena District, but go to the wrong part of town and it's just as depressing as Cleveland or Dayton. Our break was a trip from the pristine halls of the Community Shelter Board to an Inferno of squalor and mental illness. I don't have time or space here to write half of what I saw. But I'll tell you about a moment on the last day of the trip.

We had all piled into our twelve-passenger van: my parents, their token Jewish friends the Seigels, and three other Baby Boomer couples similarly afflicted by white guilt. We were pulling away from the Faith Mission homeless shelter on Broad Street to head back to base camp. I was looking idly out the window at an alley off Broad when I saw him: a black man, wrapped in ratty blankets, looked in his fifties, but could have been eighty for his sunken, zombie-like features. Maybe it was the case he'd placed alongside him that could've held a guitar, but he reminded me of pictures I'd seen of Robert Johnson. You know Robert Johnson: blues fans say he sold his soul to the devil to play guitar. Well this guy, he wasn't holding a guitar. He was holding a can of Ignition, and he had another one, unopened, beside him, ready to go. He must have felt eyes on him, because he looked over at the van, looked into my eyes, and raised his can in salute.

We were all quiet when we got home to Bexley, my family and me, so I went up to my room, opened my laptop, and began to write. Between typing, I pulled out my binders from fall quarter and found the notes on satire from the rhetoric class I thought was so beneath me. What I wrote would be published in the first spring issue of one of the campus rags as "Ignite the World: An Ignition for Every Bro."

My modest proposal was this: with the two-in-one punch of Ignition, humanity had reached its peak in beverage manufacturing. So why have anything else? Ignition did it all: It got you drunk, quick

and cheap, so there was no more need for expensive liquors or pretentious, micro-brewed beers. It gave you a caffeine buzz, so we could throw out all the coffee-makers of the world and replace Starbucks' with an Ignition distillery. Gasoline? The alternative energy potential of Ignition was as yet untapped. In short, the world had found its perfect beverage, and it had started right here in Columbus, courtesy of an Ohio State alum.

The letter, besides getting me a job as an op-ed columnist for my last quarter at Ohio State, made people laugh, or at least the kind souls (three of them) who e-mailed me in praise of it. But I'd like to think it helped set something in motion, something that would have started with or without me: the Ignition backlash. Professors, grad students who liked to laugh at undergrad ignorance, pretentious hipsters who look down on anything that isn't Pabst—these formed the backbone of the backlash. Because they hated Ignition, or at least looked on it with disdain, the bros of the world, those who pitted themselves against the intelligentsia, embraced the drink further. While this cultural war waged on, smart-ass opportunists with Macbook editing equipment were brainstorming ideas for satirical videos on Ignition, videos that Saturday Night Live was already planning to steal. Of course, with Ignition, there was the added bonus of the health issue, its walloping amounts of both stimulants and depressants.

I can't remember exactly when public debate over the dangers of Ignition began. It may have been as early as 2009. What I do remember is a quote from a concerned parent, an inversion of Madison's claim: "It's like Speedball, but worse!"

By the time Madison had to make public statements supporting the safety and legitimacy of his product, I was still in Columbus, but with a real job in advertising. I'd taken at least one thing Madison said to heart: start from the bottom.

I used a connection from the editor of a free Columbus paper to get a job as a mailroom worker at a local advertising firm. I got to the office early and hung around late. I got to know the staff and

executives. It was a short time to sitting in on meetings from there, and a shorter time to getting hired as a small-time copywriter. From that position I made a suggestion that helped put us, albeit briefly, on the national advertising map: I drafted a letter, an ad to be put in the *Dispatch* and any local papers that would carry it, stating that our firm would do no work to represent Ignition or any other drink that combined alcohol and caffeine, citing moral and health-concerned grounds. It was a shameless grasp onto the coattails of the health issue, and it worked. Ignition bore the brunt of more attacks in the media (Madison finally found the bad press he didn't believe existed), and our agency got more client calls than ever before. Among those calls was a very angry Madison Castle. I was more than happy to field the call. I would transcribe it for you here, but it was mostly a lot of swearing, and I didn't get in half the clever remarks I had planned. I really think it would disappoint you.

There is a footnote to this story. I have seen my former co-workers once since our work together ended. At the end of that summer, a month or so after I finished my English degree, I received an online invitation to a local theater troop's production of *Henry V*. I was surprised—I hadn't spoken to Clara in months. But then I realized that for a time, we numbered among each other's only friends our last year at school.

I wasn't thrilled with the production. The players added f-words to the lines for random emphasis, and at the climactic battle scene the whole thing devolved into a rock opera. Clara was good. She may have been born to play Catherine of Valois: she didn't have to go onstage til the very end, and then she got to sit there and be wooed.

But even as I write this I know I've been hard on her, maybe more than she deserved. I used her, she used me, the Seger song goes, and neither one of us could claim innocence. We were at the threshold of adulthood and mature relationships, but neither of us could quite get our foot in the door. We fell back on old ways, and the results were predictable.

I hadn't thought to bring flowers—I doubted Clara was still seeing the guy from before, but I didn't want to step on any toes if she was—and I was standing uncomfortably among the casts' friends and family by the backstage doors when I saw Nadia. The summer had turned her skin darker, and she looked as beautiful as she did when she came back single from Syria. I panicked—should I pretend not to notice her?—but she was already approaching me. She was smiling. She didn't hug me, but her smile and her hello seemed genuine. I asked her about school and life.

"I was accepted to grad school in anthropology," she said, "but I deferred for a year to stay and do research here."

"That's wonderful," I said, imagination running out ahead of me. "Where will you be going?"

"The University of Michigan."

I almost booed on Ohioan instinct, but I stopped myself. I realized, then, that Nadia was going to what we called The School Up North not because she lacked Buckeye pride, but because it was an excellent school. If she was aware of the rivalry, the t-shirts made and the drinks consumed in its name, it meant nothing to her. She was so far above our college concerns and petty hatreds that she never could have become fully part of our world.

"Are you still helping your cousin's business?" she asked.

I cringed with the embarrassment adolescents must feel when asked if they still watch Barney. "No," I said. "I'm done with that." At this time, I'd been hired at the ad agency and was gaining momentum in my crusade against Ignition. I'd imagined that my quest for retribution against my cousin was my way for atoning for the wrong I'd done to Nadia, somehow. Part of me believed it would make me worthy in her eyes.

But before I could explain any of this to Nadia, a guy with brown hair came up and kissed her on the cheek. "Miles," she said, "This is my boyfriend Ben."

What I couldn't get over was that Ben was a skinny white guy, just like me. He had graduated from Ohio State the same time I had. He'd studied history. When I asked about his plans, he told me he was entering a public service program that sent college grads to teach at inner-city schools. I couldn't help but hate him. I'm sure he was a nice guy—he was unequivocally a nice guy—but when I looked at him, all I could see was a filled slot: mine.

"There's Clara," said Nadia. She turned to me. "We're going to say hello. It was great seeing you, Miles." Her smile, while friendly, was void of any of the hope I'd been building in my head. I waved to her as she walked away. Ben stayed behind, and for a wild second I thought he was going to make that speech the good guy in the movie gets to give the evil ex. But he just stuck out his hand. "It was nice to meet you, Miles."

It struck me as I shook Ben's hand that he was a real-life example of what I'd heard described as a "person of substance." His goals and his ideals were one and the same. He wasn't driven by revenge. He wasn't doing it for the ladies. What he did was for himself—he was *about* education, knowledge, social justice. He embodied these terms. We had attended the same university for four years, taken many of the same classes, but he and Nadia had both attained something I did not possess. If you asked me what I was *about*, I would have to say "advertising." But by its definition, advertising is driven by want, by a lack. Try to delve to its center, and you'll find there's nothing there.

Perhaps you could tell me who we are outside the candidates we vote for, the films we enjoy quoting, the brand of beer we drink. Maybe you could explain what's left of us when these, the hallmarks of identity, are taken away. We could have changed our majors and career paths a dozen times, we could have abandoned all our friends and picked up new ones, and it would make no more difference than switching from liquor to beer to Ignition. In changing what we drank, we changed ourselves.

The Quarter-Life Priest

Mona missed her period and Barth started praying again.

Barth got the call in Palm Sunday Mass, his phone, which he thought he'd shut off, blaring violently into the pews. He'd been trying, in earnest, to listen to the reading of the Passion, feeling particular empathy this Sunday to the on-again, off-again faith of Peter. Peter was a guy Barth could relate to. He'd get these great bursts of inspiration, but then he'd falter: he'd sink into the sea of Galilee, or deny Jesus three times in a row. Barth, lately, had been faltering himself. His performance teaching history at Dodridge High had been poor, and his relationship with Mona, going on almost a year now, was not as happy as it once was. Overwhelmed and driven by Holy Week obligations, he'd returned to Mass for the first time in over a month.

"Sorry," Barth whispered to the older parishioners glaring at him. The phone ringing was just another item on his long list of reasons to be ashamed in church. His shaky attendance was another. So was checking out the young mother in the pew across the aisle in the middle of the Epistle reading. His attention span couldn't last half a homily, even with the engaging style of Father Archer, the young priest who said Sunday evening Mass. Barth had even daydreamed through Transubstantiation, the main event of Mass, the transformation of bread and wine into Body and Blood. The Church had shaped his youth; its emphasis on social justice had brought him here, part of a public service program to teach

in Oakland. Why then, were his thoughts on quarrels with Mona and tax returns when the Eucharist was held up? His lack of faith embarrassed him. It was the story of Barth's life in the Church: for one reason or another, he always left red in the face.

"Barth!" Father Archer was standing at the double doors to receive the multitude of handshakes from exiting parishioners. In his guilt, Barth wanted to avoid him, but the weight of his upbringing would not allow him to leave Mass a minute before the closing hymn had ended. That was Catholic calisthenics for you: even for the once-devout, a matter of muscle memory.

"Good to see you Father," said Barth. He liked Father Archer, but was unsure how to act around him. Father Archer was, for lack of a better word, cool. Barth had never known a priest under fifty, and Father Archer looked no older than thirty. He and Barth, who'd just turned twenty-three, were easily among the youngest people in the church that Sunday. Barth had been raised to treat priests with the utmost respect, but Father Archer would sometimes joke and kid around with Barth like a drinking buddy.

"Been a while, Barth," said Father Archer, a hint of reproach in his voice. Mostly when they talked, Father Archer sounded like an old friend from school, candid and good-natured, but he could inspire guilt when called upon. "It's Holy Week, Barth, we've got ten different masses coming up. You should come by. And bring that girlfriend of yours to one of them, I still haven't met her."

Barth had promised Father Archer he'd bring Mona to meet him one Sunday, but Mona kept putting it off. "I'm just not feeling it today," she'd say when Barth called her Sunday afternoons. Mona was a girl who lived largely by feel, and Barth knew trying to convince her would be a lost cause, but every Sunday he kept trying. It was one of the little things that had added trace amounts of tension to the relationship over the months, and Barth wondered if it might eventually lead to confrontation.

"Of course," said Barth. He stepped to the parking lot of St Monica's, lodged between the warehouse and brewery districts of Oakland. He reached for his phone to call his parents in Providence.

His parents had instilled in him his faith and sent him to Catholic school for thirteen years, and they were always glad to hear he went to Mass. They'd been happy for Barth when he'd been accepted to the Teach Corps, the program that had sent him from Rhode Island to Oakland, but it seemed to Barth they were still disappointed he hadn't taken the job he first wanted when he was growing up: to be a priest. Sometimes, when he saw Father Archer and the way he was loved almost universally by parishioners, Barth almost wished he had taken that route.

"How are you doing, Barth?" asked his mother on the phone, his four brothers noisy in the background. "How's Mona?" And there was the reminder, why Barth hadn't taken to the cloth: it was women. Outside of the Church, women were the driving force in his life. He was the kindergarten kid who chased female classmates trying to kiss them, and he was the hopeless grade-school romantic whose gifts of chocolate and flowers were rejected by many a crush. It wasn't until he was older that they got him in trouble.

"Your brothers all miss you. It's been so long since we've heard from you!" It had been a week, but for Mrs. Erickson this was nearly unbearable. Barth knew his mother had a keen barometer for his moods, and he didn't want her sensing the ennui that had recently overtaken him.

"High schoolers keep you busy," said Barth. He'd been there not long ago. He'd been sixteen when somehow he got his first blowjob, a girl from another school, and he'd bragged about it to his even more virginal debate-team friends. Word somehow got back to his parents, and as penitence, he was sent to a weeklong silent retreat at a Trappist monastery in rural Maine.

"Your father and I are so proud of you," she said. The retreat had been unbearable, but then something remarkable happened: Barth had a daydream, so strong that some might call it a vision, of himself on an altar. In it, he was the one holding the bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Jesus. His parents had been very quiet when he'd told them of his vision, and then arranged for him to visit the local seminary.

“Father O’Connor asked about you after Mass today,” said his mother. Father O’Connor, his parish priest at home, had led Barth on his seminary tour and answered all his questions about the life of priesthood. Barth took it all in with the utmost seriousness, and decided after to take a vow of chastity, just to see what it was like. It hadn’t lasted, couldn’t have lasted: in barely two weeks he was making out with his debate partner Christie Sloman in the back of the speech bus. Just as the piety of his youth had been teased out by the meanness of children, the brief chastity of his young adulthood had lost out to hormones. But he never forgot the clarity he’d felt on the retreat and the two weeks after, the peace of mind that made him feel closer to God than he’d ever been before.

“He asked about you, of course,” Barth’s mother went on. “He wanted to know what you’re going to do when the Teach Corps program ends next year. I told him I didn’t know.”

“Neither do I,” said Barth. Sometimes he forgot he had a year left of teaching. He wasn’t sure he could last. He had learned these past few months that sometimes you could escape the town you were stuck in just to get stuck somewhere else.

After hanging up, Barth saw that his phone had a voicemail, and that is when he listened to the message from Mona. It said, “We need to talk”—strangely somber words, coming from the carefree girl that was Mona. Barth knew the words usually held relationship-ending connotations, but he thought first to a night in early April when they’d finished a bottle of wine between the two of them and made love without protection. It had been the last time in weeks—stress from work on both their ends had forced them to spend most nights apart. At least that’s what Barth hoped was the reason. The day following the night of wine, they’d talked briefly of a morning-after pill, but Barth wasn’t sure Mona had followed through—follow-through was not Mona’s specialty. He’d told himself not to worry, but it had nagged at the back of his mind since then. When he walked into his apartment and Mona was sitting on his sofa looking somber, he could sense bad news forthcoming.

“How did you get in?” Barth asked. Mona did not have a key to his apartment. This had been another point of contention in the relationship: Mona had wanted them to move in together, but Barth fought against the idea, explaining that he was old-fashioned, that he didn’t want to disappoint his parents. That was half of the truth. The other half was that the possibility of a breaking up with Mona—none of his few past relationships had lasted as long as theirs had now—was never entirely removed from his mind, and if they moved together and broke up, well what then?

“Paul let me in,” said Mona. Paul Rendino was Barth’s roommate, a fellow member of the esteemed Teach Corps public service program that had brought them both to Oakland. He was the oldest son in a large Italian family from Boston Barth could not help but associate with the mob. He had retreated to his room, leaving Barth and Mona for what he must have sensed, rightfully, was a serious conversation.

“I haven’t seen him all day,” said Barth. He was grasping at straws, hoping to delay whatever news Mona had. “How is he doing?”

Mona shrugged. “He seemed fine.” She was unusually brusque today, and quiet. “I’m late.”

“For, um...” Barth cleared his throat.

“Yes. That.”

“Oh.” Barth knew that he should take Mona’s hand, comfort her in this time of potential crisis, but his thoughts, racing at that moment, were only of himself. “How long has it been?” he finally asked. Neither of them had been careful about birth control. Barth had attempted, half-heartedly, to uphold to Vatican’s ban, as he knew his parents had (he had doubts that all four of his younger siblings had been planned). Mona claimed the pill was “unnatural” and, besides, it gave her horrible indigestion.

“A week,” said Mona, matter-of-fact. She did not seem to be feeling the same stress Barth did. Mona had not been raised with any religion, so she borrowed from whichever mystic Eastern philosophy took her fancy. She was a girl who meditated twice daily, spoke occasionally of “vibes” and “auras,” and

glided through life, as Barth saw it, trusting karma, cosmic good will, to send things her way. Barth did not believe in karma; he believed in a vengeful God who could impregnate your girlfriend anytime He wanted.

“And that’s pretty late?” Barth asked.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s pretty late.”

“Well,” said Barth. “Shit.” Sex had been another point of argument between Barth and Mona, early on in the relationship, and it wasn’t an issue that had been fully worked out. For Mona, sex was an expression that two people loved and cared for each other. For Barth, sex was an act that ruined relationships and complicated lives. He had gone into college a virgin, in accordance with Catholic school indoctrination, and had remained so until his senior year, when he had lost it with, of all people, Becky Wentworth, a girl he’d met at the campus Newman Center. He hadn’t been able to look Becky in the eye for weeks after, and that relationship was done, as well as the other Newman Center friendships that had come with it. In some ways the experience confirmed his parents’ and priests’ warnings that sex outside of marriage was sinful and wrong. But mostly, it had made Barth feel empty.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” he wanted to know.

“It’s not an exact science,” she said. “Last week I thought it was nothing. It could still be nothing.” Mona was the one who had pressured Barth to have sex in the first month or so of the relationship. Barth had resisted for a while, citing his old-fashioned upbringing and Catholic morality. Let’s take it slow, he said. A month in, Mona got him drunk on red wine and jumped him. She’d told Barth that this was a role reversal for her, a refreshing change of pace from the string of assholes she had dated since junior high. A bad break-up with the last one had initiated her move to Oakland last May to fill a rare slot as an instructor in a music therapy program—a slot that was currently in danger, due to the recession, of being cut completely. Barth and Mona had been drawn together, in the

beginning, because they were young and new to the city. Barth wanted a friend and Mona wanted a nice boyfriend, and things progressed quickly from there.

“What should we do?” he said. The two had met volunteering at a dog shelter last June, Barth there as part of a Teach Corps service program, Mona there because she felt a deep, almost spiritual, connection to animals. It wasn’t until after their first couple dates that Barth learned Mona didn’t have a dog herself—she’d had one for a month in middle school, but she’d forgotten to fill its bowl so frequently that her parents had returned it to the shelter from which it came. Mona was not, Barth could not help thinking, a woman you wanted to raise your child.

“We don’t have to talk about it now,” she said. “I just thought you should know, is all.”

There wasn’t much to talk about after. At seven-thirty Barth walked her to her car. He barely heard her when she asked, “You’re not going to leave me now, are you?” When he asked her to repeat herself, she said, “I was joking, Barth. Kind of.”

Barth thought of his students at Dodridge. In the past month he’d broken up five fights in the hallway, and he knew there were more every day that he missed. Last week one of his students had been suspended for threatening to stab the principal. “I really don’t want to bring another child into this world,” Barth said.

Mona shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Is there anything I can do?” asked Barth.

“Besides push me down a flight of stairs?”

Barth laughed, loud, and a bit too late. He looked down so she wouldn’t see the spark in his eyes that said *Yes, what a brilliant idea.*

“Really though,” said Mona, who Barth knew did not believe in any God, “I guess, pray.”

But it was hard for Barth to pray when his mind was trapped by the tyranny of babies. It reigned over his Sunday night visit to the supermarket: all Barth saw were hassled mothers with children

screaming for candy and pregnancy headlines in the check-out aisle gossip rags. Leaving in his car, he turned to a classic rock station for comfort. Springsteen sang:

Then I got Mary pregnant

And boy, that was all she wrote.

He turned it off. Not even the Boss could save him.

That night he tried to take Mona's advice and pray in his bedroom, but he found that he could not. He had all the right materials in there: crucifix on the wall, a bottle of Lourdes holy water on the bedside table, and a statuette of Mary on his dresser. But even at this improvised altar he could not focus. He kneeled and crossed himself, but the only words that came to him were, *Oh fuck*. Since this hardly constituted prayer, he climbed into bed for a night of little sleep.

With every toss and sleepless turn, the possibilities came to him, each one worse than the last. Adoption was the ideal scenario, from both a Catholic and self-interested standpoint, but he doubted Mona would be willing to endure the trials of pregnancy just to carry someone else's baby. Then there was the other A-word, the one he could scarcely bring himself to name. As a Catholic, he was strongly opposed, and he was fairly certain Mona would not like the idea either, but if this scare turned out real, who knew what she would want to do. He could take the coward's way and run, but the more he thought about it, that way required a kind of courage he wasn't sure he had.

Those options aside, Mona would have the baby and they'd raise it together. But if they did, they would more or less have to get married, and, Jesus, did he really want that? Starting a family at twenty-three would be the end of his dreams. He'd never become a tenured professor. He would teach high school history for the rest of his life. He and Mona would buy a house and he'd work til middle age paying back his disappointed parents for the down payment. He would lose his hair, grow a gut, and coach his son's middle school baseball team. All these impossible or undesirable options butted against each other until pushing Mona down the stairs began to seem like a great idea.

*

On the way home from Dodridge the next day, a funny thing happened: Barth found himself able to pray. In his room, he'd been surrounded by the artifacts of Church. But in the car, he was isolated. He didn't concentrate on any image as if it contained God, but rather focused, as he drove, on the windshield, the rear- and side-view mirrors, all four sides of the car. The act reminded him of his Catholic school indoctrination of the omnipresent God, a God that surrounded him tighter than the Oakland rush hour. He turned off the radio and began to speak, quietly at first, and then with rising panic, to God.

"Well, God, it's me, Barth," he'd say. "I know it's been a while. Several months now. It's just my girlfriend, you see, she's late, and might be pregnant. So, if she could just not be pregnant, I would be very grateful." By the end of his car ride he'd lost his self-consciousness. "Why me, God?" he asked. "I gave you twelve years at Catholic school. I altar-served. What did I do to piss you off?"

At the apartment, Barth's roommate Paul asked him what was wrong. When Barth said nothing, Paul said, "Bullshit."

When Barth asked how Paul knew something was wrong, Paul said, "You've hardly left your room since yesterday. You've been talking to yourself a bit, which I can only assume means you're crazy or you're praying. And, also, I overheard your conversation with Mona on Tuesday."

"What do you think I should do?" Barth asked. Paul possessed a poise, a maturity attained by few in their age bracket, and seeking advice from him felt natural. He was seldom seen out of a collared shirt or a button-down. He spoke with authority even in casual conversation, and Barth had trouble imagining his students would ever mess with Paul.

"You wouldn't like what I have to say," said Paul. "It might offend your delicate Catholic sensibilities." Paul was raised Catholic too, but he liked to claim that he couldn't stay in the Church

because he was “allergic to bullshit.” He’d tease Barth about his faith, and sometimes they would stay up for hours having theological debates, but faith had not yet got in the way of friendship.

“I see,” said Barth,

“I don’t think you do,” said Paul. “There is a safe way out, Brother Barth, if you have the stones to take it.” The truth was Barth had thought about it several times throughout the day, but he’d recoiled in horror every time. It wasn’t an option; it couldn’t be. And even if it was, he would have trouble affording it on a teacher’s salary.

“It’s not really an option to me,” said Barth. “I don’t believe in it. Even if I did, it’s a horrible thing for her to have to go through.”

“So’s childbirth.”

“I want to do the right thing here, Paul.”

“Maybe you’re just doing the right thing for you.” Paul took his wallet from his back pocket, withdrew three bills, and held them front of Barth. Barth had to suppress a gasp—all of them were hundreds.

“This is yours,” he said, “whenever you ask for it. Now money’s not an issue—you just do what you gotta do.”

*

The Tuesday morning commute came, and Barth’s prayers were reduced to bargaining. He had been taught not to bargain with God, that offering to give up your baseball card collection did not move Him, but Barth thought He must make an exception sometime. “If she’s not pregnant, we won’t have sex for a month. We won’t have sex, ever. Not the premarital kind, anyway. I’ll marry her, God, if that’s what you want. Down the road, I mean. Not right now, that’s kind of why we’re having this, um, conversation in the first place.”

By Thursday, when Barth heard nothing from Mona, his car prayers lost their self-consciousness. He turned the radio on and off, honked a few times at nothing, and began to pray. "I will do anything, God," he said. "Anything you want. I know I've strayed. I know I haven't lived according to Your plan." It took him saying the words to realize they were true. "Literally, I'll do anything you want. Anything. I will leave Mona, if that's what you want. I'll never see her again." It was then the old vision came back to him: Barth in black on the altar, the Host raised in his hand.

"I'll become a priest," he said.

Barth braked for a red light. His cell phone rang. He picked up.

"I'm not pregnant!" said Mona.

A horn sounded behind him. The light was green and he hadn't moved. "That's wonderful, Mona," he said blankly into the phone. "I'm so happy for you."

"I've never been this happy to be bleeding in my life," she said. It was exactly the kind of flippant humor she'd always had, before the scare. Barth had a feeling that for him, now, nothing could quite be the same as it had been.

"You didn't go to the doctor or anything?" he asked.

"I was going to go see him," she said. "But a minute ago, I just decided to check down there, just in case, and well, you know. Now I don't have to go."

Barth was quiet on the other end. The timing, he was thinking. It wasn't coincidence. It was cosmic.

"Barth, what is it?" asked Mona. "Aren't you happy?"

He'd dodged a bullet. God had given him a free pass for the day. But it wasn't a free pass, not really. He'd made a deal. He'd made a promise. "I am happy," said Barth. "Of course I'm happy. But we might have to, um."

"We might have to what?"

There was no good way to tell her. “We may have to break up now.”

*

The only way Barth could conceive of what had happened was to call it a miracle: a wonder of infertility, the Miracle of the Period. In Bethsaida, Jesus divided loaves; now, it seemed He had prevented dividing, reproductively speaking, which to Barth was just as wondrous. The timing, the recurrence of Barth’s oldest and most fervent imaginings, it all pointed to a role in a divine plan Barth had not felt part of for a year. How could he go back now to the way things were?

The hard part, of course, would be explaining this to Mona.

“But,” said Mona, baffled. “I’m *not* pregnant. That’s a *good* thing.”

“I know that.” Barth, after his transcendent moment, had now been thrust horribly back into the world of San Francisco traffic with one hand on the phone and one on the wheel, a feat he found difficult even when not having life-altering conversations.

“Then why are you talking about breaking up with me? Is this a joke?”

“No, Mona,” said Barth. Talking to Mona in this way made everything about driving harder. He swerved into the right-hand lane, then quickly swerved out of it to avoid a stopped car. “I had—it’s hard to explain. Can we talk about this later?”

“I’d really like to talk about it now.”

“I am getting in my car right now, and I am going to your apartment. We are going to talk about this.”

“I’m not going to my apartment.”

“Where are you going?”

St. Monica’s was looming in Barth’s car window. “Mona, I have to go.”

“Barth, don’t hang up on me.” But he had already closed his phone.

*

St. Monica's was a church Barth had never liked much. No church is ever like the one at home, and sitting in its pews, Barth had rebelled at everything in the unfolding Mass that seemed new and out of place. His parish in Providence had been traditional, an organ-and-choir kind of place, and every strum of electric guitar and beat of a bongo drum sounded like blasphemy to Barth's ears. But St. Monica's was the only church Barth had been to in his year in Oakland, and going anywhere else would have felt to him like shopping around (a luxury afforded only to the feel-good Born-Agains). He wanted to take immediate action, so he turned off his phone—Mona had not stopped calling it—and walked through St. Monica's doors.

Barth had always been a little suspicious of how Father Archer could look so young. Barth was not yet one year out of college before he pulled a suspiciously grayish hair from his left temple. He'd tried to tell himself at the time that the discoloration was a trick of light and not the effect of a high-stress job that yielded few visible results.

"Barth is unusual for a first name," said Father Archer. They were in his office, a small one connected via a walkway to the Church. "Is it Catholic?"

"It's short for Bartholomew," Barth explained. "My parents didn't want me to be associated with The Simpsons when I was a kid. They thought it was immoral."

"You must have caught hell for it," said Father Archer, not without sympathy.

"Oh sure. I got called Barf or Barf-On-You, usually. Definitely wasn't one of the cool kids. And it didn't help that, ah, I wanted to be a priest when I grew up." Talking to a man in the collar had put him into confession mode: he hadn't talked this candidly with anyone, including Paul and Mona, for months. "This was a Catholic school, Father, and I got called a fag because when they asked us what we wanted to be when we grew up, I said a priest. Eventually, they just sort of teased it out of me." He shook his head. "Kids can be pretty mean."

“And yet if we don’t become like them, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven,” said Father Archer.

“You should come to my job for a day, Father.”

“I think what you’re doing is wonderful and necessary,” said Father Archer. “Our youth group does tutoring at Dodridge, but you’re the one doing the heavy lifting. We need more young guys like you, willing to go out and serve.”

Barth thought about his teaching job, about how every day after the honeymoon of the first week, it had gradually lost its luster until now, when he woke up swearing instead of praying, dreading the drive to work. He had wanted to be a warrior for education the way the Jesuits had been soldiers for the Church, winning several converts along the way, but after eight months of piss-poor attendance and quizzes and tests below projected scores, Barth often felt like the last flag-bearer on a field of retreat. “It’s not what I expected it to be,” he said.

“Few things are, in my experience,” said Father Archer. “I know your job can’t be easy, and I know it must frustrate the hell out of you. All the same, you’ve got to keep fighting the good fight.”

“What if I’ve chosen the wrong battle?”

Father Archer laughed, a bit grimly. “You have a quick wit,” he said. “I’ll bet your students like that.”

“No Father,” said Barth, surprised by his own vehemence, “they don’t. They hate me. There’s graffiti about me on the desks, and I’ve stopped reacting when they throw pens at my back. I’m stiff, and I’m boring, and I’m not doing anything for them. My efforts are getting me nothing, Father. I wanted to do good by teaching, but now I know there’s a place I can do so much more.”

Father Archer sighed. “The priesthood isn’t a place to escape your problems, Barth. It’s not a place to resolve a quarter-life crisis. This might seem like the perfect solution in the moment, but you’ll rethink this when you realize you’ve got people counting on you. You’ve got your students, and even

though I know you think they're not listening, they are. You've got your girlfriend. Just because you're having doubts about your life as it is doesn't mean you can abscond to the collar and make everything OK."

Barth nodded slowly. "I understand that, Father," he said. "It's just I feel strongly compelled towards the clergy right now, and I wanted to make sure I explored the possibility before it faded away." Barth could not bring himself to tell even Father Archer about the miracle. He held this part of his story most tightly to him for fear it would be snatched away, leaving him with nothing but what he'd been before.

"I don't want you to think I'm discouraging you," said Father Archer. "We'd be thrilled to have a young man like you aboard. God knows we could use you. But I have to make sure you're doing it for the right reasons, you understand?" Barth did. "I want you to pray on this for a few hours. If you still feel compelled, come see me at the youth group meeting tonight, it'll be in the church. And for God's sake," he added, "talk to your girlfriend."

*

The apartment was dark when Barth got back. Paul was reading by the light of a lamp, dressed in his usual Polo attire for bar-hopping on Friday night. "I thought you'd be out by now," said Barth.

"I wanted to wait for you," said Paul, closing the Vonnegut he was reading. "Thought we could go out together."

Barth had been slightly intimidated going out with Paul before—his taste in bars verged toward the loud and expensive—but never before had the invitation felt so ominous. Barth thought of Paul's family, and he wondered if the order had come down for him to be whacked. "Sure," he said. "Just let me change first."

"You won't need to," said Paul. "Not for where we're going."

Paul drove them in his Chevy past the normal nightspots to a wayward bar called Lady Luck, the sign of which featured a pale red-head naked but for the shamrocks covering her breasts. The front door was obscured by a haze of cigarette smoke. Inside the clientele was, at the very least, fifteen to twenty years older than Barth and Paul. A Foreigner cover band blared, and on the dance floor men with mullets rubbed up against head-banging women with already-sagging breasts.

"This doesn't seem like a place you'd come to," yelled Barth as he squeezed into the booth nearest to the men's room, the ammonia scent of urinal cakes filling his nostrils.

"Sometimes you get lucky," said Paul. He went to the bar and returned with a pitcher of cheap beer. Conversation over the music would have been impossible, and Paul didn't seem interested in trying, so Barth waited until the band took a break to start conversation.

Paul beat him to it. "You know what all these people have in common?" he asked.

Barth shrugged. "Bad haircuts?"

"They had kids when they were right out of college," said Paul. "If they went to college. Tonight's the one night of the month they could find a sitter or an aunt to watch the kids. For you and me this is tragic, but for them, this is as good as it gets."

Barth swirled the foam in his glass. "You didn't need to take me here. I see the young-parents crowd at parent-teacher conferences every month."

"Not enough, apparently," said Paul. "You dodged a fucking bullet, my friend. And if you hadn't been so damn lucky, this would have been you." Pouring another beer, Paul said, "Now, that's fine, that's your choice, yours and Mona's, and I did my best to help you there. But what I'm wondering is, why the hell are you in here with me and not celebrating with your girlfriend?"

"I don't know. How did you even know about this place anyway?"

"I come here sometimes to pick up cougars. But that's beside the point. You're not explaining why Mona came to the apartment crying today because you said you might break up with her."

So that was it. Mona and Paul had been close as far as friends and friends' girlfriends go. The three of them had spent many hours in the apartment together, and sometimes Paul and Mona would pick on Barth for his Northeastern moral stiffness. It made sense that when Barth stopped communicating with her, she'd gone to Paul. "It's not for certain yet," said Barth.

"Damn it Barth, I just spent the past two hours comforting your girlfriend. Talk to me straight. Is there another girl?"

"What?"

"Do you see that bartender over there, Shirley? The red-head?"

Barth looked to where Paul was pointing and saw, to his surprise, an attractive young woman, late twenties, filling mugs for a group of rowdy men with ponytails. "She's very pretty," said Barth.

"She's a goddamn knockout," said Paul. "The kind of girl you look at and think, 'God, I wish I wasn't dating this other girl right now, because Shirley would come along and fix all my problems.' But really, it wouldn't solve shit. Do you know what I'm talking about? Whatever it is you're thinking of doing, you'd just be throwing away a good relationship, and getting nothing out of it in return."

"I know it sounds crazy," said Barth, "but we're dealing with some pretty unusual circumstances here."

"Try me," said Paul.

Barth told him then about the Miracle of the Period. When he got to the priest part, he noticed Paul holding his glass a little more tightly than usual, drinking with bigger sips. When he'd finished, Paul was not speaking.

"You think I'm an idiot?" said Barth.

"Idiot is not the word I would use," said Paul.

"What word would you use?"

Paul said a phrase so profane that the biker-looking men at the next booth glance over in surprise. "You're not becoming a priest," he then said.

"Why not?" said Barth.

"I've seen you with your prayers, and your rosaries and statuettes and shit, and it's very cute and all. It's nice. Inspiring even. Couple times, you've almost made me wish I still believed in God. It's fine to be Catholic, up to a point. But once you put on that collar, you're an attack dog in the Pope's army. You start telling people what they can and can't do, and you start ruining people's lives."

"I could help a lot of lives, too," said Barth. "Religion isn't meant to ruin people."

"Yeah?" said Paul. "Tell that to my uncle, who's divorced and won't get remarried 'cause the Church tells him he can't. Try telling that to my cousin, who's got a father that won't speak to him on account that the person he loves most in this world happens to be another guy. The Church won't let him get married either. And you're going to tell him he can't get married like anyone else? You're going to tell him he's sinful and wrong?"

"It's not always—" began Barth, but Paul would not be stopped.

"I think you might say 'Go to hell' here, but I have a different way of saying it: Go fuck yourself. Seriously. Do it. Maybe you'll start thinking a lot less seriously about the priesthood when you finish."

Barth stared as Paul grabbed his jacket and put his arms through. He tried to find his teacher voice. "You're drunk, Paul," he said. "Sit down for a minute, don't go."

"And you can find yourself another roommate," said Paul, "because there's no way in hell I'm living with a goddamn priest." He shoved his way to the door and walked into the haze of smoke outside.

*

Barth had to call a cab, and when it came, he realized he had no idea where he wanted it to take him. Should he go back home and risk the further wrath of Paul? He could go to Mona's, he could try to

explain the monumental significance of the Miracle of the Period. But Mona, it was safe to say, would be angry, and not without good cause. He'd spoken rashly on the phone earlier that day, seized by a wild, desperate impulse: speak now or forever hold your peace. He hadn't wanted inspiration to fade as it had so many times in the past, but in his excitement, he'd hurt one of the people, maybe the only person, now, who cared for him the most.

"Where to from here?" the driver asked.

There was, it seemed, only one place to go. "Take me to church," said Barth.

Barth arrived at St. Monica's surprised to find dim light emanating from inside the stained-glass windows. He was hoping to visit the rectory; he hadn't expected the church to be open after sunset. Barth pushed open the doors and saw a Church occupied by teenagers on a Thursday night: high schoolers, from the looks of them. Ten or fifteen were sitting around the altar, some in pews, others cross-legged on the faux-marble floor. Father Archer sat on the altar's front step, he and most of the kids laughing at a joke that had just been told. They could have been in a pizza place or at the mall. Barth's youth group days came back to him, the confused juxtaposition of sexual and spiritual elation: one minute he felt filled with the Holy Spirit during Adoration, the next he had an erection from glancing at Melissa Peshl's boobs. It was his childhood, and come to think of it, his adult life, in a nutshell.

"Barth," said a voice from the back pews. He turned around. The surrealism deepened: it was Mona.

The itch he'd been feeling all week, the desire to run, struck his legs so hard for a second he worried his calves would cramp. Reverence, or fear, he wasn't sure which, kept him rooted in place.

Mona patted the spot next to her on the pew. "Sit," she said. He obliged. Mona wasn't angry, or didn't seem it. Perhaps the last week had been a dream, a prank. He waited for the cameraman to come out, for the invisible host to announce the show's name.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Mona smiled. "You kept inviting me to come," she said. "Well, here I am."

"Were you expecting me to be here?"

"I said, there must be another girl," she said. "Paul thought it was something religious. And I thought, well, shoot. If God told him to break up with me, then how am I going to argue with that?"

"It wasn't like that."

Mona held a hand up. "Let me finish." She folded her hands back into her lap. "I decided to come here and yell at you, if you were here. But then you weren't here, and I waited, and it's kind of peaceful in here. And I like how it smells, the incense." She straightened a book in the pew ahead. "I even saw my first mass. And you weren't even here to see it."

"Holy Thursday," said Barth. "I forgot."

"What's Holy Thursday?"

Barth balked. Mona had never shown any interest in his faith before. "It's the night Jesus had the Last Supper."

"Like the painting," said Mona. "I've been here forever, and I'm starving. I haven't eaten anything since the bread the priest gave out."

Before he could stop it, Barth's teacher voice came out. "Mona."

"I just followed what everyone else did," she said. "And I don't see what all the fuss is about. It tasted awful."

Barth looked towards the altar. One of the kids had brought a guitar from its case, and now Father Archer was leading the kids in song. Some were reluctant, but it looked like all of them were singing. Barth didn't know the tune.

He looked back at Mona. "You weren't supposed to do that," he said.

"Wine wasn't bad though."

"That's for baptized Catholics only. That's the body and blood—"

Mona held up her hand again. "I don't think you should yell at me," she said, "until you can appreciate how my week has been."

Barth swallowed. Ah, yes, wrath: he had not escaped it. His penance, now.

But Mona was level-headed. "I know it was hard for you. I know you were scared. But I peed on a stick today. I peed on a stick."

Barth looked wildly at the pews around him and quelled the urge to shush her. He was discussing pee in church, him and a girl with whom he'd sinned mortally. Sins beget sins.

Mona went on: "I bought the test Sunday and I stared at the box all week. I didn't want to take it, because, I thought, and it was weird, but I thought: if I didn't know, then it was like I wasn't pregnant. But then the not-knowing got worse than knowing. This past week, every meal I had was like a last supper. It felt like a huge part of my life was about to end." She shook her head. "It's not something I could run away from, you know? You can't run away from yourself. But you could have run away, and there's nothing I could have done about it."

"I wouldn't," said Barth, weakly, to convince himself as much as her. He could no longer swallow the lump in his throat. There it was again, that old Catholic friend: guilt.

"I don't know a lot about what you believe. We never really talk about it. But you can tell me now. Whatever realization you had today, you can tell me."

"You won't think I'm crazy?" She shook her head. Barth took a breath and, feeling much like he was in a confessional, told his girlfriend the story from way back: his long-latent yearning for the priesthood, his prayer and how it beget the Miracle of the Period. When he finished, he bowed his head and was silent. He waited for Mona's reaction.

"Well," she said after some thought, "You have to at least try now, don't you?"

"Try what?"

"Your promise. You made a promise, didn't you?"

The youth group had disbanded, the guitar had been put away. Several teens quieted as they walked past Mona and Barth, giving curious sidelong glances. Barth lowered his voice. "In a manner of speaking. It was more of a bargain, really."

"Doesn't matter. I don't pray, exactly, but meditation's not too far off. I understand why you did what you did, and I think we have to try it."

Barth was surprised by Mona's enthusiasm. "You know what this would mean, if I actually went through with this. For us."

"Maybe that's your path to take." She touched her hand to his, lightly. "And if it is, you can't let me get in the way of that."

Barth nodded. To agree any more, after all he'd said to her today, seemed inappropriate. It was of course now, when she had acknowledged for the first time the possible end of their relationship, that he felt the old feelings for her well up in his chest cavity like an overflow of oil.

Father Archer was snuffing candles when they approached the altar. He put down the snuffer and embraced Barth warmly. "I'm glad you came tonight," he said. "A little late, but still."

Barth was never sure how to respond to Father Archer's admonishments, whether they were in jest or sincere. "I brought my girlfriend, too," he said.

Mona wasted little time on introductions. "Barth is thinking about becoming a priest," she said.

"So he tells me," said Father Archer. "And he should think about it very carefully, if it means losing a woman like you."

Mona colored slightly and laughed. "Father, please!" she said. Barth looked on in admiration: Father Archer had just hit on his girlfriend in front of him, and she hadn't minded a bit. *He* hadn't minded a bit. Father Archer was already a likable guy, but the collar gave him an old man's license for harmless flirtation—one of the privileges of the clergy.

Mona had a gift for befriending strangers, and she and Father Archer were hitting it off. “Your youth group seems like fun,” she said.

“I miss Thursday night poker sometimes,” said Father Archer, “but the kids get a lot out of these sessions here. We’re thinking about having them Fridays too, maybe doing a lock-in eventually.”

The man played poker. Barth was again impressed. “Poker night sounds fun,” he said, surprising himself with how miffed he sounded.

“I used play over at Derek Green’s house, one of the ushers. I meant to invite you, but I hadn’t seen you at Mass for a while.” The slight reproach in his voice was unmistakable, but Barth didn’t mind. This church had priest poker tournaments. Maybe, he thought, I could do this thing after all.

“Come on, I’ll show you the rectory,” said Father Archer, and it was there that Barth’s mind changed. The rectory was accessed through a tunnel behind the altar; once one got over the thrill of a secret passage, one had to contend with a hallway scarcely wide enough to fit two people, lined with dying potted plants, that looked as though it hadn’t been repainted since Barth’s first communion.

“The Holy Hilton, we call it,” Father Archer was saying. “Tithing has been lower as of late, and this is the last place that money goes.”

“That’s noble of you,” said Mona.

Father Archer shrugged. “We took vows of poverty. To live another way would be hypocritical.”

The rectory halls were quiet, and the rooms they passed were dark. “Where are the rest of the priests?” asked Barth.

“Either sleeping,” said Father Archer, “praying, or in our rec room.” He gestured to a hallway on their left with cinderblock walls lit by the blue light of a television.

“Can we see it?” asked Mona.

"Ah, no, actually," said Father Archer. "They don't like us to have visitors after eight, and especially not women." He frowned apologetically. "I'm the youngest here by several years. The others are very traditional, you see."

Father Archer's room was disappointingly sparse as well. Barth had expected a larger, grander version of his own room's homage to Catholicism, but he found no statues, no statuettes, and no images on the wall, graven or otherwise.

"Poverty, again," he said. "They like us to live modestly."

"Detachment from worldly possessions," said Mona. "Sort of like Buddhism."

"I have often thought that myself," said Father Archer. "My superiors, on the other hand—"

Barth had become absorbed in Father Archer's bookshelf, a modest construction with two levels that doubled as a bedside table. Many of the books he had read already, for Catholic school or his own spiritual journey: Augustine's *Confessions*, Merton's *Seven-Story Mountain*, Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. An unrelated volume caught his eye.

"*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*," he said, hefting the volume from its shelf. "I'm assigning pages of this for my history class. Are you a Classicist, Father?"

"A little," said Father Archer. "I had some more volumes, but the powers that be like the reading selection to be, shall we say, fairly uniform around here." He laughed, not without bitterness. "I think Rome has a few too many gods and goddesses for them. Of course," he added quickly, "I took a vow of obedience."

From Archer's room they went to his office. Walking over, Barth tried not to meet Mona's eyes. He didn't want her to see the growing disappointment in them. His admiration of Father Archer's coolness was being rapidly replaced by a growing sense of pity. He was not a wholly happy man. It may be that the poker games Barth had taken as a sign of happiness were a completely necessary escape to maintain sanity. Archer's opposition to Barth's becoming a priest made more sense now. Barth

wondered if it had been a sacrifice for him to turn him away, knowing that he might be losing a kindred spirit.

The office had chairs for the three of them. "I'm sure people ask you all the time," said Mona, "but do you ever get lonely?"

"Oh, sure," said Father Archer. "That's chastity. But I like to tell people that this church is my family."

"That's a nice way of looking at it," said Barth.

"It has its problems, like any other family," said Father Archer. "There's a honeymoon period in the beginning, when you're first assigned a parish, and if you get it right everyone loves you for six months. But then someone didn't like your homily on the Beatitudes, and so-and-so thinks you're showing off for signing in tune with the choir." He reached up, unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, and un-tucked his Roman collar on one side. Barth tried not to stare; he had never seen this done before. Mona was completely unfazed. "It's just gossip," continued Father Archer, "the usual workplace politics. It's really not that different from a regular job."

"Do you ever regret it?" asked Barth. It was important for him to ask, because now, as with his job in the Teach Corps, as with Mona sometimes, even now, with the Miracle of the Period and his promise—he had a sinking feeling of buyer's remorse.

"God has a plan," said Father Archer. "He had one for me, and he has one for you too. Both of you. You just don't know what that is yet." He looked at his watch. "I believe it is in my plan to leave you for the night. Early mass tomorrow for Good Friday. There's about an extra hour's worth of Latin chanting in there."

He bade them good night and urged Barth, once more, "Pray on it."

In the parking lot behind St. Monica's, Barth reached for Mona's hand, but she drew it away. "What do you think?" he asked.

“What do I think,” she said. She stopped to trace a crack in the blacktop with her toe. “I had a theory about you, Barth, and I think you just proved it right.”

The lump was in Barth’s throat again, but its flavor was distinctly panic. “What’s your theory?”

She kicked a loose chunk of blacktop towards the church. “That you only like things in the beginning.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You and me. We were great in the beginning, but lately we haven’t been. We had this scare, and you jumped at the first sign from God to leave me.”

“I made a promise,” said Barth. “You said that yourself. It was—at the time, I thought it could be, you know.” He could hardly own up to it now. “A miracle.”

“I know,” said Mona, “but it was an awfully convenient miracle, don’t you think?”

The timing had seemed divine before, but now it seemed like Barth had acted prematurely, that he’d confused correlation with causation. “It was hard for me,” said Barth. “When I thought I’d have to leave you. It hurt.”

“It always hurts,” said Mona. “But you’d get over it. You would move on. On to the next thing, whatever that was.”

Barth wanted to tell her that he felt old already, old and powerless. He wanted to tell her that he felt that at twenty-three, already so many paths in life had been closed to him. He wanted to tell her that for once in his life, he wanted to be swept up in something great and never let go. But he couldn’t find the words. “This was my childhood dream,” said Barth. “It was what I always wanted to do.”

“You’re a different person now,” said Mona, taking his hand, rubbing her fingers on his knuckles. “When we were in there, you knew in five minutes that it wasn’t for you. You used being a priest to get away from the girl, and now you want to use the girl to get away from the priest. I’m sorry, but it’s not going to happen.” She let go of his hand. Her shields were up. Barth could debate, he could use his

teacher voice, but he knew it would do him no good. She pushed his hair back, staring above his head, and placed a single kiss on his cheek.

“Peace of Christ be with you,” she said.

As she walked across the blacktop, Barth’s brain, struggling to prove her wrong, tried to conjure the vision from earlier, the vision of the chalice held high. He tried to see himself as a defender of the faith, a saver of many souls. Instead he saw himself in his classroom, with students following his lecture and taking notes. He saw himself with Mona, having dinner, walking in the park, making love. Mona’s car beeped. The distance between her car and Barth was now almost exactly equal to the distance between Barth and St. Monica’s door.

Always, he thought. Caught between the Church and the girl.

Catch Them All

“Fifth grade was fourth grade with something wrong.” –Jonathan Lethem, The Fortress of Solitude

I worked my last case as a detective in 1998. It was an angry year at my house. Mom was mad at the president for getting a blowjob—I didn’t know what that meant—and she was madder at my Dad for something I didn’t quite understand. My main concern was the case. It was a missing Pokemon card, a Charizard, belonging to one Keegan Trendik, fellow fourth grader at St. Boniface Elementary. I know they’re not worth much today, not beyond nostalgic value, but a decade ago they were selling for hundreds of dollars. Things degrade with time, I guess. Back then, my parents had a promising 401K, but since The Split it’s been divided in half for years. Then, I was Detective Terrence Jenkins. Now, I’m just Terry.

Zack Milton told me about the missing card first. He came to Mrs. Juravacey’s room before the last bell rang to give details. “Keegan checked his binder after recess and it was gone,” he said. Zack was a man of the people, a Student Council rep for Ms. Casper’s homeroom, with admiration from teachers and classmates alike. At the time he was also my best friend. I asked him once to tell me what a blowjob was—it was a case I was working on the side—but he got embarrassed and didn’t spill. “I feel bad for Keegan, losing that card. Did you know it was holographic?”

“I’d heard,” I told him. I’d even seen it once, when he used my deck to pick his Charizard’s teeth.

Keegan Trendik, the card’s former owner, was one of the Masters. If you played Pokemon cards at St Boniface, you were a Trainer or a Master. To be a Master you had to have five holographic cards and win five matches a week. The rest of us were Trainers. We called ourselves Trainers without a second thought, but no one could remember agreeing to the terms, or deciding who would get to call themselves Masters.

“Charizard was his best card,” I said. “His rankings on the Sheet are going to drop lower than a Dugtrio burrowing.” The Sheet, a paper kept by the Masters, was supposed to contain stats on every trainer—strength of deck, win-loss record, most valuable Pokemon. Trainers like me hoped it would be used to select a new Master, but so far the same five guys had been in charge for as long as Pokemon had been around. Then, it seemed like they had always been around and always would be, but now, doing the math, it had only been about a year, and the time of their prominence was already running out.

“It must have been worth a lot of money,” said Zack. Money was something that came up a little more frequently in conversations with Zack these days. He had moved out of my neighborhood to a different (my mom said nicer) part of town, and instead of taking the bus together mornings as we had since kindergarten, Zack got dropped off right before the bell rang in his dad’s black Sedan. Transportation didn’t change the friendship, as far as I was concerned— we still met in St. B’s grotto, a shrine with a statue by the playground, every morning before class.

“I wonder who would have taken it,” I said.

“Terry, don’t do this,” said Zack, “the detective thing. Ms. Casper’s been informed and she’s taking care of it. I don’t think we need you on this one.”

“I think it’s a mistake to trust a teacher who couldn’t tell an Omanyte from an Articuno.”

Zack shrugged. “I don’t think I could tell you the difference.”

“Just let me go over there and talk to him,” I said.

“I don’t know, Terry,” he said. “Keegan’s pretty ticked. You’re not exactly going to receive a warm welcome in there.”

“If I wanted warm welcomes,” I said, “I would have joined Student Council,”

“Didn’t you already try that?”

“Touché.” When I heard Zack was running at the beginning of the year, I’d put my name on the ballot for Mrs. J’s class. I lost in a landslide to Todd Leonard, one of the Masters. I know it was a landslide because Mrs. J gently hinted as much after I demanded a recount. After that, I decided to stick to detective work .

“Just trying to warn you,” said Zack. “Keegan might not want your help.”

I shrugged. “He’s going to get it,” I said, “whether he likes it or not.”

Keegan Trendik was the kind of guy who would know what a blowjob was. He gelled his hair and combed it forward in a way that made girls want to touch it. He played for the fifth grade’s new lacrosse team, a group of guys that made the football players look nicer than the St. B’s guidance counselors. Most of all, he had a brother in the eighth grade, and eighth graders were full of the wisdom held by those soon to leave St. B’s behind.

When I walked into Ms Casper's classroom, he was leaning on his lacrosse stick, talking to the Riley twins, Nikki and Leslie. "Sorry to interrupt, Keegan," said Zack. "Someone here to see you."

"Aren't you afraid that will get stolen, too?" I said, gesturing to the stick. He stopped midway through a story to glare at me.

There was a clear Master-Trainer line dividing Keegan and me, a line he had made solid the week before when he whipped out his Charizard and said, "I could beat your whole deck with this card." The match barely lasted five minutes. That was the only time I'd seen the Charizard, and the holographic glow from the card stayed with me when I closed my eyes for minutes after.

"I quit the team a week ago," he said, gesturing to his stick.

"Really?" said one of the Rileys. "Why?" said the other.

"Conflict with tennis." Keegan turned away from the twins to look at me. "This isn't your homeroom."

The nice thing about being a private eye, I almost told him, is that you're not tied down by jurisdiction. "I'm here to find your Charizard," I said, withdrawing my notepad from my pocket and flipping it open. Early in my career I'd learned that you had to have the props of a detective if you wanted to be taken seriously. I tapped my pen on my notepad and looked up at Keegan with professional demeanor. "Can you tell me where you last saw it?"

Keegan looked over at the twins and sighed. "I've told this story enough times," he said. I understood why he was so frustrated: you couldn't expect girls to know the significance of a Pokemon card, especially one as rare and valuable as Charizard. That was excluding Ashley Vernell, St. Boniface's only girl Pokemon trainer, but then I always excluded Ashley. I didn't see a reason not to—after all, she was a girl.

“Just tell it one more time,” I said. I’d be in just as sour a mood as Keegan if somebody stole a Charizard from me. Charizard was the baddest of all Pokemon, able to inflict one hundred hit points with the devastating Fire Storm. Any deck that held a Charizard in its rotation would dominate St Boniface Pokemon tournaments for years.

“He’s just trying to help you, Keegan,” said Zack. He was trying to help, but he was doing it in a political way, which bothered me. Zack was a political guy since the start of fifth grade, and that’s why I didn’t ask him for help on cases anymore—you couldn’t be friends with everyone if you wanted to be in the detective game.

I was in possession of a decently respectable deck at that time. I led with an Arcanine and had a Pidgeot and Kadabra on deck for clean-up. Of course, I was usually the one who wound up getting cleaned up. I was scrimping up my stingy allowance to buy a pack a week, but some of the St B’s guys—guys like Keegan—were building decks powerful enough to conquer small nation-states. Their parents would take them to the collector’s shops and drop up to a hundred dollars on packs. The only card these kids had in mind, of course, was that fire-breathing beast. I’d seen them at the mall—they’d tear open packs, check for Charizards, then toss the cards on the ground and buy another.

“I brought my deck to school yesterday to play Ashley at recess, but it was too windy on the playground so I put it in my locker. I was gonna play Todd today, so I just left it there overnight.” St B’s didn’t bother with tiny security measures like locks on lockers. “I checked my deck before the busses came yesterday. They were all in there last night.”

“So it was there when you left school?”

Keegan seemed calm now, almost bored. “I bet it was a janitor or something,” he said. “That’s what my mom thinks.”

“Did she explain how a janitor would know what a Charizard is worth? Or maybe she told you why he didn’t just take your whole deck.”

Keegan turned his stick in his hands. “I didn’t think about that,” he said.

“What are you saying, Terry?” asked Zack.

“This was done by someone who knew his Pokemon,” I said, looking from face to face for emphasis. “This was one of us.”

“Terry,” said Zack, “It’s almost time for the bell. You’d better get back to Mrs. J’s room.”

“Yeah, you don’t wanna miss the bus again,” said Keegan.

“What was that?” I said. True, I’d missed the bus some afternoons, but I’d been doing important things like reading about my role model, Encyclopedia Brown, a junior sleuth like me who used scientific trivia to uncover the truth. If getting in a few extra pages meant missing a bus where the eighth graders made you sit in the front and threw Skittles at the back of your head, that was fine with me.

“Never mind, Terry,” said Zack. “You should probably go.” His voice dropped to a whisper, still loud enough for Keegan and the girls to hear. “Make sure you knot those laces, too.”

Keegan and the girls snickered. I glanced down and saw my shoes were, in fact, untied. Darn round laces. No matter how many times I tried to tie them, they always came undone.

“I just have one more question for Keegan,” I said. “Ladies, would you excuse us?” The Riley girls eye-rolled and left, and I asked him my question. Turns out, Keegan didn’t want to tell me what a blowjob was either.

Another possible reason I missed the bus so many times is that I didn't like going home. It was a little tense there. I couldn't get through five minutes of Kid's WB without Mom changing the channel to hear newscasters talk about the president on CNN. "That bastard," she'd grumble under her breath. She'd bite the lower side of her right lip, the same way she bit it when she talked about Dad. At this time the word "divorce" was being thrown around my house like the baseball Dad never had time to play catch with. I was old enough to know it wasn't supposed to be my fault and young enough to think it was anyway.

"Hey, Mom," I said as I walked through the door. She was folding laundry and watching the presidential hearings on TV. She'd wanted to get a sign that said "Impeach Clinton," but Dad said he wouldn't put it in the yard. I once asked Mom if she fought so much with Dad because he was a Democrat. She almost laughed, ran her fingers through my too-long hair, and said no.

Mom invited me to sit with her and asked about my day. "Keegan's Charizard got stolen," I said. As I filled her in on details, I was careful not to mention my involvement—adults don't always understand why these things are important. She might say something like "Shouldn't you be focusing more on your math homework?" and make me feel guilty. I got the feeling she wasn't paying much attention anyway, the way her eyes kept flickering to the TV.

"What's going on with the president?" I thought if I brought him up she might pay more attention to me. She just sighed and shook her head. "What's wrong?"

"All the wrong people in the world have all the power," she said.

"That's not right," I said, though I still didn't know exactly what he'd done. I just knew that it was wrong.

She turned off the TV. "I'm going to write a letter to the newspaper," she said. "We need people that are willing to stand up for what's right. People like you and me."

“And Dad,” I added quickly.

She pulled out the drawer in the coffee table where she kept pen and paper. “What do you want for dinner tonight?”

“Chicken fingers,” I said. When she asked, I always said chicken fingers. “Is Dad eating with us?”

She bit her lower lip. “No,” she said. “He isn’t.”

In the days preceding The Split, it seemed Dad was always working late.

After interrogating Keegan, I’d hustled into Mrs. Juravacey’s room and sat at my desk for attendance. Luck, the bad kind, had placed my name next to Ashley Vernell’s in the seating chart. The only advantage to sitting next to Ashley Vernell was that I didn’t have to stand next to her—she’d shot up nearly five inches since last year, and the thought of being shorter than a girl, especially her, made my face burn. This was our usual exchange of un-pleasantries: “Vernell,” I’d say curtly. “Jenkins,” she’d say in return. Most mornings this was enough.

Ashley Vernell was the only girl Pokemon Trainer in all of St. Boniface. The Masters called her Ash Ketchum. I was mad because if there was an obvious analogue for Ash Ketchum, hero of the Pokemon cartoon on channel 7, it was me. Ash was a lone wanderer, a tough young trainer my age who got into situations over his head but prevailed with his Pokemon. No way a girl with a Water-heavy deck deserved that title. Years later, when online research revealed that Ash Ketchum was voiced by a 19-year-old girl named Veronica Taylor, I was even then a little embarrassed.

Today, I had business with Ashley. Her name had come up in the Trendik interrogation and I decided to question her quickly before the bell rang. But before I could even open my mouth, she asked, “You hear about Keegan’s Charizard?”

“I heard you were supposed to match decks yesterday at recess,” I said. “What happened?”

“Wind was too bad,” she said. “We could have lost our cards. But then, he lost his anyway.” Her smile was mischievous, full of pink bands and wire. “Goes to show you can’t leave your Pokemon in your locker.”

“How’d you know he left them in his locker?”

“I talked to him after school yesterday.”

“I didn’t know you two talked outside playing Pokemon.”

That smile again. “Some boys don’t mind talking to girls, Terry.”

“I don’t mind talking to girls,” I said. “I just mind talking to you.” None of what I said was true—I did mind talking to girls, a lot, and Ashley was the only one I could have a conversation with. Truth was, I enjoyed the curt back-and-forth of our rivalry—it was the only way I knew how to talk to her. She might not have even heard me, though, because the bell was ringing and Mrs. J was motioning for us to stand for the Pledge.

If you’d asked me on my most honest day who I liked, and I mean *like* liked, I never would have said Ashley Vernell. I couldn’t distinguish what I felt towards Ash from grade school loathing. Ash was someone I should have identified with, even if I couldn’t yet see the things we had in common: lower-middle class, parents in or soon to be in divorce court. Her mom worked in the principal’s office and was friendly with my mom at PTA meetings. We

could have been friends, or more, in that cheesy fifth grade way. But Ash was the only girl who ever beat me in Pokemon, and that was something I couldn't forgive.

I decided to get some answers in the cafeteria. My homeroom's lunch period would give me access to first through fifth graders—anyone who'd so much as picked up a Pokemon card in his lifetime would be there.

Zack caught up with me in the line outside. "What are you having today, Terry?" he asked. Our hot lunch program that year received an upgrade thanks to a St B's campaign to match the public school levy, and now Boniface kids were up to the pleats of our khaki pants in hamburgers and ice cream sandwiches. Kids were dropping \$5 before they even hit desert. I still ate my lunch from a lunchbox, a point of pride: this was a vintage Encyclopedia Brown lunchbox, picked up by Dad from a comic book shop near downtown Baltimore. On the front, Encyclopedia's magnifying glass separated his first and last name, and he wore his trademark deerstalker cap. It was tin, not like the plastic lunchboxes they made in that day, and it made a beautiful clanging noise every time I hoisted it into my locker.

"I'm having clues, with a side of promising leads," I said.

"Come on, Terry," said Zack. "Don't ruin anybody's lunch. You can ask questions at recess."

"I'm just going to ask a few questions," I said. "Wanna come?"

Zack shook his head. "I'll leave this one up to you."

"Will you be at the usual spot?" I said.

"Not today. I have to eat at the lacrosse table."

Zack and I had eaten lunch at the same table every day that year. This was the first I'd heard of him sitting with any athletes, and since it was the lacrosse players, I wasn't happy.

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Have to, not want to," he said. "They want to talk about funding from Student Council. New netting for their sticks or something."

The cafeteria was like walking into a sauna of boiling hot dog water. "You seem very upset about sitting at the cool kids' table," I said.

Zack shrugged. "It'll be interesting, I guess. A change."

I took my complimentary chocolate milk from the milk lady. I was usually the only fifth grader to grab milk. Most guys in my class would be drinking Squeeze-Its or Sprite from the new snack bar. Zack grabbed a tray and got in line. Zack used to brown-bag with me, but since he'd moved out of Beltdale he bought lunch at least once a week.

"Todd Leonard's on the team, isn't he?" I said, standing with him in line more for the company.

"He's the forward."

"So you know the positions now. You must be a big fan."

From the lacrosse table, Todd Leonard called to Zack and motioned for him to join them. One of them leaned over and whispered something, giving me a sidelong glance, and they all laughed.

"Terry, I gotta go. I'll talk to you after lunch. Just don't do anything crazy, okay?"

"You know me," I said.

I didn't need to show a picture of Charizard to ask kids if they'd seen one. At the mention of the name they'd look up wide-eyed from their baloney sandwiches and stammer. They'd all

seen him on posters or on TV, but no one had seen him at St. B's. "Belonged to Keegan Trendik," I'd say. Zilch. "Holographic." No dice. I was about to give up on rounds when a poser behind me said: "Hey Sherlock, where's your lunchbox?"

I whipped around. He was a tall kid, untucked polo, shoving the last of a Rice Krispies Treat into his mouth. The real kind, not the imitation ones. A group of kids sitting around him hid their laughter, badly.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"Aren't you the kid with the detective lunchbox?" he asked. This kid had nerve, I thought. Talking trash and I'd never met him before. Must be in Ms. Casper's class.

"You have a problem with it?" I said, then added "Punk?" for good measure.

"Just that it's gay," said Untucked Shirt.

Something about the meanness of this kid—remember that in fifth grade, 'gay' is the insult to end all insults—reminded me of the inevitable forthcoming Split. Both were wanton, senseless. I couldn't control The Split. But I could do something about this punk. I grabbed the first open container on the table—it was chocolate milk—and threw it onto Untucked's lap. Milk splashed everywhere—the table, my shirt, but mostly Untucked's pants.

He scrambled for napkins. "You're dead meat, loser."

"I'll bet, Milk Pants," I said.

I turned and walked fast towards the cafeteria door. I wasn't much for lunchroom fighting, or fighting anywhere, for that matter. If he and his buddies wanted to fight me, they'd have to take it outside where the recess monitors could come to my rescue. But when I looked back, no one was getting up to go after me. They were sitting there laughing and chanting "Milk

Pants” while their friend sopped up milk with the flimsy cafeteria napkins. For a second, I almost felt bad.

I decided to lay low in case Milk Pants was going to put the pressure on. For recess, the grotto was as low a profile as you could get—none of the lunch moms ever check there. I sat under the statue of book-stabbing St. Boniface and puzzled out the details of the case.

“It doesn’t make sense, St. Boniface,” I said aloud. “If you stole that card, you could never play with it. People would know exactly where it came from. What’s the angle?” No response from St B. “Maybe,” I said, pacing, “the intent wasn’t to use the card. Maybe someone just wanted to sabotage Keegan.”

“Not a bad theory, Jenkins.” Conversation with St. Boniface had been so engrossing I hadn’t heard Ash sneak behind me. Now she was towering over me in the grotto, and I felt the collar of my Catholic school polo grow a little hot.

“Any luck on the case?” said Ash.

“Sorry Ash,” I said. “I don’t talk shop ‘til the case is closed.”

“Are you close to closing?” she said. “Or do you need to spill milk on a few more kids’ laps?”

I poked a crack in cement with my shoe. “He insulted my lunchbox.”

Ash nodded. “My dad used to be a prosecutor,” she said. “That’s someone who goes after bad guys.”

“I know what a prosecutor is,” I said.

“He used to tell me when you’re trying to figure out who the bad guy is, you ask *cui bono*?”

“I never took Spanish.”

She smiled. “It means ‘who benefits’.”

“It’s a Charizard. Who wouldn’t benefit?”

“Good point,” she said. She kicked the same crack as me. “Did you know Zack is trying out for the lacrosse team?”

“No, he’s not,” I said, the opening strains of panic rising in my throat. “He would have told me.”

“There’s an open slot since Keegan quit. Zack’s been getting buddy-buddy with the guys on the team. He even moved to their neighborhood.”

“I don’t get what you’re saying.” My voice was cracking at this point, but I was too angry to be embarrassed.

“I’m saying Keegan’s off the lacrosse team, and he won’t be in the Masters much longer without that Charizard. And maybe you haven’t noticed, but every kid that’s a Master is on the lacrosse team too. Think about it: Zack takes Keegan’s card, Zack takes Keegan’s place.”

My head started spinning like a tetherball. Zack would never steal a Charizard. But until five minutes ago, I thought he’d never join the lacrosse team. “How did you know he was trying out?” I said.

“He told me at recess yesterday.”

“Don’t tell me you talk to him too.”

Ash sighed. “I talk to a lot of guys, Terry,” she said. “I’d talk to you, but you...” She studied St B’s face for a minute. It occurred to me at this moment that though all of our banter, Ashley was a pretty mature girl. She had a kind of wisdom usually afforded only to older kids. It occurred to me at this moment I could ask her what a blowjob was, but I decided against it.

“Good luck on your case,” she said, and turned away. Her pleated skirt bounced slightly all the way back to the playground.

I found Zack on the blacktop. He was standing on the outskirts of an impromptu three-on-three lacrosse game with basketball hoops for goals.

“Memorizing their moves?” I asked.

“Waiting for a chance to play,” he said. He looked down and mumbled, “They’re out of sticks.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m sure they’ll have one for you once you join the team. You can get it with your Student Council funding.”

“Why are you yelling?” He stepped back and wrinkled his nose. “And why do you smell like milk?”

“Why are you sneaking onto the lacrosse team and not telling me about it?”

To me this was the ultimate betrayal. Zack could be a politician, he could mediate and placate all he wanted, but joining the lacrosse team meant crossing to the dark side. I couldn’t let him do it.

“I didn’t think you’d be interested,” he said. “You don’t like most of those guys anyway.”

“That’s because they’re not nice guys. I saw Todd Leonard trip a third grader with his stick last week. Is that what you want to be?”

“We don’t have to do the same things all the time,” he said. “I just want to give something new a try.”

“No,” I said. “What you want to do is sit at the lacrosse table and make a list of people who aren’t as good as you.” As I said this, a light in my head went off brighter than a Voltorb

preparing for Self-Destruct. I stopped yelling and put a hand on Zack's shoulder. "Cui bono," I said.

"Terry, I don't know that Pokemon either."

"The Sheet," I said. "That's how to solve this thing."

"What sheet?"

"The one the Masters made," I said. "Keegan's about to get kicked out of the Masters. Whoever's highest in the rankings would take his place."

"Then that's the thief?"

"Dude, we need to get that Sheet."

Zack's eyebrows went up a level. "We can't look at the Sheet," he said. "It's for Masters only."

I wasn't listening. "Hey Todd!" I said.

Todd's team had just scored. He sauntered towards us, his stick on his shoulder. "Hey, Zack," he said, then shot a look at me. "This kid's after you, if he wants to play."

"We need The Sheet," I said.

I had his attention now. "What sheet?"

"The one with the Trainer rankings."

"Oh," he said. "That sheet." He switched shoulders. "You can't."

"It's going to crack the Charizard case wide open," I said.

"That's great," he said. "You still can't see it."

"Why not?"

Todd shrugged. "It's for Masters only."

“Then Keegan will never get his card back. This case is never going to be solved if you don’t show me that sheet.”

Someone shouted by the basketball hoops. Todd’s team had scored again. “I gotta play defense,” he said. “See you at tryouts, Zack.”

When the buses came I was still madder than a Tentacool in a fish tank. Beltdale #42 was always first to arrive and last to leave, so I waited with Zack until it was just him and me in the parking lot.

“You can try again tomorrow,” he said. “Maybe one of the other Masters will let you see the Sheet.”

I shook my head. “They’re all the same. The Masters. The lacrosse players.”

“All of them?”

“Most of them,” I said. “You know, there’s one thing I’m glad I was wrong about today.”

“You were wrong about something today?”

I grinned, embarrassed. “For a minute I thought you stole the Charizard.”

“Why would I?”

“Ash had a theory it was part of your plan to get closer to the Masters.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Zack. “I couldn’t become a Master. I don’t know Pokémon half as well as you do. I don’t play enough.”

“You’re all right,” I said. “I’ve beaten you, and I’m pretty good. Outside Keegan, hardly anyone has beat me except...” Here it was. My Encyclopedia Brown moment: It didn’t involve a

rare bit of scientific trivia, but it was more thrilling than turning to the end and finding you guessed right. “Ash. Ashley beat me.”

“You don’t think.”

“Ashley could beat Keegan too, without that Charizard. All she had to do was take it and she wins her way into the Masters.”

“Ash? Really?”

“The card disappeared in the morning. The only people that come early enough to take it are me and her.”

“She doesn’t seem the type.”

I wasn’t listening. I was running straight for the principal’s office where her mom worked. if I ran fast enough I could catch her.

As I rounded the corner, Ash was walking out of the office, backpack slung over one shoulder. She was turning around, telling her mom to hurry up.

“Stop!” I yelled, and tripped over a shoelace. Ash’s Doc Martens greeted my face as it fell.

“Terrence!” That was Mrs. Vernell. I looked up and she was standing behind Ashley. “Are you all right?” She looked ready to go into full maternal mode. “Did you miss your bus?”

“The only thing I missed,” I said, “is the giant, self-implicating hint your daughter dropped at recess.”

“I’m sorry?”

I cleared my throat. Adults, I’d forgotten, don’t always understand detective-speak. I’d have make things very simple.

“Ash,” I said. “Please hand over the Charizard you stole from Keegan.”

This was a big moment for Ash. She could break down and confess, or keep her cool and deny everything. She kept her cool. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Ash.

“Cui bono, Ash,” I said. “That’s you. You benefit.”

“Ashley, honey, what’s this about?” This was good. If I couldn’t force a confession from Ash, her mom could.

Ash shrugged. “Ask Terrence,” she said.

“Mrs. Vernell,” I said. I cleared my throat. “Your daughter stole a rare and valuable Pokemon card yesterday morning, and I’d like her to give it back.” I turned to Ash. “I’ll search your backpack if I have to.”

“Terrence,” Mrs. Vernell said carefully, “do you have any proof that Ashley stole this card?”

“Her name’s at the top of the Sheet,” I said. “The Sheet will explain everything.”

“And do you have this sheet with you?”

“No, but... Please, Mrs. V. I can prove it to you. Just let me search Ashley’s backpack really quick.”

Mrs. Vernell put her hands on Ashley’s shoulders. She didn’t have to reach down far. “I’m sorry Terrence,” she said. “I can’t let you do that.” The worst part about all this was that she didn’t seem angry or upset at me. It looked like she was holding back laughter. Stonewalling and anger, I could take that, but laughter was worse than anything. “Now do you need to use the phone to call for a ride?”

I felt like a kindergartner with a mouthful of sand. “No thank you.” I watched Ash and her mother walk back into the office. Mrs. Vernell had her arm around Ash, but she still turned

back and flashed me those pink braces. By the time I got back to the parking lot, my bus had left. No force on earth could bring me back to that office, so I began the two-mile walk home.

Walking down Mills Road, I got to thinking about Mrs. Vernell in the office. She may have been defending her child, as moms do, but it was just as possible that something sinister was going on. A cover-up. Ash was using Mrs. Vernell as a shield: Mom maintains innocence, daughter goes home with Charizard. No fifth grader would question an adult, especially an adult working in the principal's office. Well played, Ash.

And if Ash could convince Mrs. V to help her schemes, she could get others in on it too, with her talking to all different kinds of guys. The Masters—why didn't they care about Keegan's card getting stolen? They must have known Ash would steal it. They had known and approved, decided to welcome Ash into the elite folds of their membership. Ash was the mastermind behind it all.

But Ash couldn't hide behind her mom all day. She'd be in Mrs. J's class with me tomorrow, sitting next to me before the bell rang. I had the rest of the school year to wear her down. I had Zack to help. No doubt in my mind: Ash Vernell was going down, and so was anyone that helped her.

I decided that when I got home I was going to tell Mom about the conspiracy. I thought that if anyone would understand my frustration, it was her. But when I got home, she wasn't in the mood for listening.

"They're letting him go," she said before I could even put my bookbag down.

"Who?" I asked. Then I looked at the TV. The president was smiling and shaking hands with a crowd of people.

“Oh,” I said. The den was in disarray. A small mountain of laundry sat unfolded. The letter to the editor Mom was writing yesterday was crumpled into a ball on the coffee table.

“He committed a crime,” she said. “He lied, he cheated. How can they forget that?”

What I should have done was give my mother a hug. But I was in fifth grade, meeting dead ends at every turn on the case, and I was irrationally angry that she didn’t care.

“How come you’re so mad at him Mom?” I said. “You don’t even know him.”

“Terry,” she said slowly, the way she talked when she was angry. “If you knew what he did—”

“I know what he did,” I said. “He got a blowjob. But Ashley Vernell stole a Pokemon card, and she’s going to get away with it. How is what he did any worse?”

“Honey,” she said. “How do you know what—what a blowjob is?”

My cheeks went red. “I don’t,” I said.

“Well,” she said. “You can ask your father about it when he gets home.”

I never asked him, but a year later I found out anyway. I was getting The Talk, and he tacked on oral sex as a footnote. At that point it had been almost a year since The Split. I thought then about connecting the dots, questioning him about the links I never made: the late nights in the office, the secretary fired from his firm, Mom’s hatred for a philandering president, and blowjobs. I never did.

We had The Talk in the car, of course, on his way to get a TV for his new apartment, and he didn’t look at me the entire time.

The next morning I waited in the grotto for Zack until the warning bell rang. Five minutes ‘til the Pledge and no Zack. I was worried Mrs. Vernell had hired goons holding him in

the office so he wouldn't talk, making his story straight with theirs to continue the cover-up. He wasn't there, and I ducked out before Ashley's mom could spot me. I ran back to Mrs. J's to make the bell and found him waiting for me in the hall.

"You've got to stop the investigation," he said.

"What are you talking about?" I said. "I've uncovered a massive cover-up. I'm about to blow this wide open."

"They found the card."

My jaw dropped like a cartoon doing a double-take. "What are you talking about?"

"This morning," Zack said. "Keegan looked in his locker again and found it. It must have just fallen through a crack or something."

"No way," I said. "Ashley knows I'm on to her, so she put it back."

"What are you talking about?" said Zack.

I had too much invested in this case to let it just solve itself. Ashley wasn't going to get out of anything. "Zack, the trail of corruption goes all the way to the principal's office," I said, speaking slowly so he could grasp the gravity of what I told him. "It implicates Ash, Mrs. Vernell, maybe the Masters too. There are several key players at work here, and I am gonna catch 'em all."

Zack seemed not to hear me. "Do you know a kid named Johnny Grebens?"

"Never heard of him," I said. "Why?"

Before Zack spoke, I could sense that what followed would not be good news. "I ran into him getting dropped off this morning. He says you bullied him at lunch. Poured milk on his lap."

"So I dumped milk on the kid. He deserved it."

"He's in third grade."

I felt like I'd taken a dodge ball to the stomach. I considered myself to be a many things: a decent Trainer, an avid reader, a junior detective. But a bully? That wasn't me. That was the kids on the lacrosse team.

"He looked old," I said. "I didn't know."

"He's about to tell on you, big time."

I knew this would be bad. The higher-ups at St. Boniface did not look kindly on bullying, although the Masters seemed to get away with it. "Maybe you could pull some strings with Student Council. Help me out a little."

Zack shook his head. "I can't bail you out of this one."

"What's going to happen?"

Zack sighed. "I don't know," he said. "Detention, for sure. Probably a meeting with the parents."

Meeting the principal would be bad. Having Mom and Dad in the room together while it happened would make it worse. The thought of it made me put my head against the wall. "This is going to suck."

The morning bell rang, and we heard the sound of kids throughout the whole school standing for the Pledge. "I have to get back," Zack said. He rushed into to Ms. C's room, leaving me alone in the hall.

Keegan Trendik thanked me once. It was a few weeks after my meeting with the principal, when we were both serving Saturday detention. He told me he wasn't a Master anymore. He'd been booted without ceremony the week before. "It was kind of a relief. The whole thing was getting old. Besides," he said. "Pokemon are kind of gay anyway."

As for the meeting, it sucked. Dad came late. He smelled like cigarette butts. Mom sat staring at the principals' desk like she was trying not to bite her lower lip. The principal wasn't as bad as I thought. He smiled and called me 'son.' He sounded like the President, even looked like him a little. Maybe that's why Mom acted like she hated him the whole time.

The principal ceased small talk and transitioned to talking about my "behavioral issues" and "misconducts." Seemed that milk-dumping Johnny G was not my only offense. His secretary had brought a disturbing story to his attention. Apparently I had been making wild accusations about her daughter, like I was under the impression I was carrying out an investigation.

"Now Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins, please don't take this the wrong way," he said. "But does your son think he's a detective?"

I realized then, in a way I couldn't articulate sitting in that oversized chair, that it wasn't beating on younger kids or calling kids gay that would get you in trouble—it was not knowing things. It was innocence, or ignorance, it was trying to play the game without knowing any of the rules. Todd Leonard could have tripped a dozen third graders with a lacrosse stick and got away with it, because he understood the rules. The very act of my trying to understand them had led me here, to the principal's office.

I had tried to learn the rules as an outsider, crack them as I would a case. But this was a case where the witnesses had bad memory and all the leads went cold. For trying to win the game the wrong way, I could be singled out, I could be punished while the Masters and the cool kids played on without consequence. I was the fall guy for my own case.

Mom and Dad looked at me. They'd moved their chairs apart and were still shifting away from each other. I looked at the principal. His hair was back and his chair was forward. He was smiling like it was his job to care, probably because it was. "Well?" said Dad. "Do you?"

“I’m not a detective,” I said. “I never have been.”

The Sexual History of Mother Theresa

Five weeks after her transfer to St. Bartholomew’s High in the fall of 2006, allegations of slutiness were levelled against Tara Kinder, allegations that have shaped our recollections of her to this very day. These allegations, at the time, were shocking, or at least somewhat unexpected—this was a girl who in five weeks had nearly broken the record for number of service hours accrued in various soup kitchens in the greater Cincinnati area. Some dismissed her as a slut, others revered her as a kind sexual saint, a Savior who would come and deliver us (the lower stratum) from our own innocence.

To many from St. Bartholomew’s, Tara Kinder is, at best, a girl from high school whose reputation was unfairly maligned. Few will think of her more than in passing, this girl who came into our lives for two years then came out of it. Few will lose sleep over the way she was treated, the collective cruelty to which we all, unwittingly or not, contributed. But to the Recorder of this history, Tara Kinder was more than a slut, or a saint. She was a girl, one of the few at that time, who treated your Recorder like a human being. For that he will be eternally grateful. It is a duty taken up by your Recorder to right these wrongs and write them, recording, for the first time, an accurate and complete sexual history of the girl known as Mother Theresa.

Tara’s story has its roots in the third grade with her first and long-time boyfriend Roger Abood. Roger was one of those rough boys who would kick gravel from the Merlton Elementary playground into Tara’s face. Tara was one of those persistent girls who would, after a faceful of gravel, cry for half a

minute, then chase after Roger again. Evidently Roger broke down and decided the gravel would no longer be enough—he would have to ask Tara to be his girlfriend. He may have tried this merely as a means of placating her. I'll try this, he must have thought, and then she'll go away. But for reasons still debated to this day, Tara and Roger beat the odds. The average length of a third-grade playground relationship, at that time, was to days. Tara and Roger lasted seven years.

To this day, no one is sure of the secret of their success, or if, in the end, it was a success at all. Some give credit to their common Mediterranean roots. The two of them were the tannest of their classmates thanks to the neighboring homelands of their ancestors—Roger's father was from Lebanon, and Tara's mom could trace her roots back to Israel. The staunch opposition of Tara's mother may have been a factor—from a young age, Tara went against the parental grain. She was never moved by her mother's arguments against dating *goys* or her father's clumsy attempts to bribe her, with ice cream or ponies, to break up with Roger. Whatever the reason, they lasted. Though they were too young to know it, they had already set the wheels of a great History in motion.

Things changed in their relationship, as they did for the entire country, after the attacks of September 11. Roger, who before had been the most reliable of class clowns at Merlton Middle School, became somber and fierce-tempered. It turned out he had an uncle thrice removed who worked on Wall Street who had been in one of the surrounding buildings and had been crushed by the rubble of Tower 1. The fact that Roger had never met this distant uncle did not assuage the intensity of his grief—in fact, it only seemed to deepen it. Three weeks after the attacks, he announced his resolve to join the military when he turned eighteen, and when questioned about the distance into the future of this occasion responded that nothing was going to change his mind. It was at this point that he decided he and Tara should have sex.

Roger's reasoning was simple: he was going to join the military in five short years, and they would send him off to Afghanistan, or Pakistan, or whichever of the Stans we would be fighting then, and he could die. And who would have sex with him when he was dead? No one, which is why it was important for him to get it out of the way now. Tara protested: public school sex ed videos told them it was best to wait until marriage. Roger countered: They couldn't get married by the time that Roger wanted to be having sex, which was yesterday. Tara was able to convince Roger that their youth and inexperience would not make for a favorable first encounter with sex; besides, she hinted, Roger might not yet be fully equipped, both mentally and physically, for the deed. Roger resented the slight on his development of puberty but agreed to receive sex as a gift for his fourteenth birthday, although this was eventually pleaded down to a blowjob, which Tara carried out, albeit with great reluctance, one year later on the ratty couch in Roger's basement.

As Tara performed this heavily negotiated act, two important and recurring thoughts, out of necessity, kept her mind off the task at hand: 1) Her gag reflex was impressively low, and 2) the smell, and therefore taste, or Roger's manhood, if one could yet call it that, was so unpleasant that she vowed, henceforth, to have as little contact with it as possible. Later that night, she put her plan into effect when, in the middle of watching *The Matrix* with Roger's hand creeping slowly up her shirt, she ran into the bathroom and induced vomiting. She reported back to Roger, when he asked what was wrong, that the aftertaste of his junk had made her barf. Roger's indignation quickly gave way to embarrassment and guilt. He guiltily agreed that she would not be obligated to perform the act of oral sex again for a while. Why Roger gave up so easily on the subject of blowjobs is one of the important mysteries in the sexual history of Tara Kinder. It can be speculated by the recorder that Ms. Kinder, while aware of blowjob techniques thanks to the marvels of Ask Jeeves or perhaps the surprisingly forthright and detailed talk she;d received on sex from her mom, had deliberately ignored this protocol (not unwritten,

but unpublished) while servicing her boyfriend. It was a technique she would use later in her sexual career to quickly end relationships with almost completely assured efficacy.

Tara Kinder may never have had to resort to her patented Rough Blowjob technique were it not for her revulsion to the act of sex itself. Tara's attitude about sex was a reaction to her mother's, who in turn was rebelling against her own mother. Tara's grandmother had warned Tara's mother often about the evils of promiscuity, telling her to wait for an NJB (Mom's abbreviation for Nice Jewish Boy) and ignore the ones, good-looking though they may be, who drank and drove motorcycles and chased *shikse* girls. Tara's mother had stuck with this philosophy (as far as Tara knew), and she had netted a Jewish boy who was nice, just not particularly good-looking *or* successful. Tara's mother was only bored enough, it seemed, to procreate with her husband once—Tara was an only child, and despite her best efforts to close her ears to Mom's hints, she'd picked up on the fact that the sex before and after her conception was so sparse and unexceptional that it could be counted by times per year. So cavalier was her mother's attitude towards sex that when Tar confided to her at age fourteen that Roger had been pressuring her to do it, she shrugged, one hand holding her wineglass, and said, "Why not?"

It didn't come, therefore, as a shock to Tara when her parents filed for separation halfway through her freshman year. Tara was probably a little excited to be moving out of the house with her mother and into an apartment. She probably looked

on the move as a temporary adventure, because of course her parents were going to get back together. They just needed time apart from her dad. She would have explained this to Roger and Roger would have nodded, hearing the edge of desperation in her voice and realizing that now would not be a great time to bring up sex again.

And Roger did learn to leave sex alone as the happy couple went into high school together, wearing his one blowjob like a badge of pride among fellow athletes who, no matter how cool they appeared, had scarcely received so much as an over-the-pants tug from their eighth-grade girlfriends. But as the year went on, cool guys were paired up with pretty girls, albeit briefly, and by the time of the spring fling in May, sex was had by nearly all save Roger and Tara. Roger's lone blowjob story, once the almighty dollar in the trade of sex stories, was now as deflated as the peso.

That summer Tara joined the local swim team, walked neighbors' dogs through the park, and tentatively started her now-famous soup kitchen rotation, all in the name of avoiding Roger. The ragging Roger took for his virginity had taken a few months to penetrate his thick skin, but one's skin can only be thick for so long involving sex in high school. During the summer, she succeeded in staving him off with promises for the new school year, but once sophomore year began she could avoid him no more and had to deal with the consequences of his desperately increased sexual appetite. During their makeout sessions, he was handsier than ever, breathing heavily and unbuttoning his polo shirts in a not-so-subtle imitation of initiation for sex. No amount of hand-slapping would discourage him, the next time, for reaching toward Tara's belt buckle as he buried his tongue deeper into her throat.

In the name of their long and storied history, Tara was willing to put up with this frustration. But when her parents' divorce went through a wet morning in January of Tara's sophomore year, her faith in relationships was shattered completely. Roger's cavalier reaction (his parents had split when he was six) didn't help either.

Now here we come to the inevitable falling out and breaking up of Tara and Roger—a pivotal moment in this history. Yet very few records are available to the recorder about this incident. The subject, when asked about it, will give only the vaguest of hints, though she has been known to kick the ground as though searching for an answer there, appearing sad, but also concealing a smile. Roger will

not give an answer either, though he seems, it is reported, to be suppressing a shiver Yet a fringe group maintains the relationship ended in violence. This fringe insists that Tara, in the middle of the sophomore hallway, actually threw a punch at Roger to end the relationship. It is this recorder's opinion that the fringe is probably accurate. Or at least partially so; in the most major events in these histories, everyone has a different view.

Whatever happened exactly between Tara and Roger to end the relationship, Roger's friends, who had become by default Tara's friends, took the side of Roger. They seemed to think that if Tara was capable of dealing in violence, they should be allowed to be violent with her, at least on a verbal and emotional level. There were dirty looks in the halls and closed tables at lunch, there were notes passed. It is not entirely certain why Tara's reputation as a slut, surely the most damage one can do to a girl in high school, was not fabricated at this point. Possibly because her largest sexual encounter to that point—the blowjob with Roger—was a matter of public record, she had been dating Roger at that time, and she had scarcely been seen with any boys since. Roger, of course, could have made up stories to get the rumor mill running, but he kept silent throughout the tormenting of Tara, neither assisting nor intervening. It is possible he still liked Tara, or at least respected her. It is also possible he was afraid of getting punched again.

Tara would never let them see her cry at school. She waited until the re-routed bus dropped her off at her mother's apartment where they'd moved after the divorce. Tara's mother, perhaps mistaking her daughter's sorrow for misplaced self-pity, would say, "Oh, get over yourself, will you? You can go to your dad's this weekend. Tomorrow, if you like. Just stop, ok? I get it."

Tara's first source of alcohol is not known for certain; it is likely that she broke into her mother's significant supply of Chardonnays first, thus creating her infamous distaste for red and even white wine. What she settled on afterward was the beer left in the refrigerator by her mother's occasional

gentleman visitors. It would likely account for her preference, rare for the women of our generation, of light beer over mixed drinks (which for those under the age of 25 in this era consists usually of vodka and some kind of Coke product). However she first got a hold of beer, she found a way to keep herself supplied, and developed a system: one to calm down after school, one to celebrate finishing homework, and one while watching a late night film on TNT before bed. She finished out sophomore year and went into that summer in a drowsy, burp-filled haze.

The summer of '05 was a new low for Tara. She didn't have the ridicule to deal with, but she kept drinking anyway. It motivated her to do nothing. She stayed in all day and watched rented movies. She became an expert on the cinema of female revenge. Unreturned film noirs, rare kung-fu films, and the works of Quentin Tarantino can still be found in the cabinets of her mother's apartment. That summer she gained seven pounds. Soup kitchens in the Cincinnati area suffered from a 15% drop in volunteering. Were it not for the night of her vision, who knows what might have happened.

Tara was watching a reluctantly recommended film, *The Passion of the Christ* (critics called it a Jew hate-fest, but her mother had her feeling a little anti-Semitic herself in those days—also, the guy who played Jesus was at least semi-attractive). She was nursing her beer (now that she started drinking at noon, she had to make them last), and eating the accompanying pretzels, in the checkerboard shape, to go along with her beer. The readers will no doubt be familiar with these lightly butter-flavored but otherwise unremarkable pretzels, their primary design flaw being the flimsiness of the checkerboard, how the ends break off in the bag or on dips of thicker consistency. Tara was eating these pretzels without much regard for their shape until her hand passed over a remarkably disfigured pretzel and she was inspired to examine it more closely. The top two corners were missing in such a way that the pretzel in her hand resembled a head, cloaked and veiled. She held the pretzel up to the screen, and to her surprise, it matched almost perfectly with the outline of Jesus' weeping mother. She recalled, vaguely,

the kooks who claimed to see the same woman on a grilled cheese sandwich, the annoyance her mother had expressed for the *goys* who would make such a claim. But the evidence was right in front of her. Tara's checker pretzel could be nothing less than a sign from God.

"Mom!" she called, not bothering to hide her beer. "I have to go to Catholic school!"

Her mother looked at her, baffled. "But... we're Jewish."

All of it came out: Tara's misery at school, her longing for her father, her resentment at her mother for driving him away. Tara's mother could not help but notice Tara's steep decline as of late, though she certainly had tried. She had turned a blind eye to Tara's lack of friends and the empty cans of Coors stacking up in the recycling bin, telling herself, likely, that this was something every girl her age went through, just a phase. She'd get over it. But on seeing Tara openly drinking and observing miracles, she must have realized that failure to enact some fairly dramatic changes would take her out of the C-range of parenting and straight to a below average. Within a week, she filled out the transfer paperwork.

So it was that Tara began her academic career anew at St Bartholomew's, feeling slightly fetishized by the unfamiliar plaid skirt and white blouse of the Catholic school girl uniform (they were not, she concluded, quite as sexy as they were advertised to be in teen movies and Halloween catalogues). Her intent was to make friends and learn a bit about the guy with the six-pack abs they called Jesus. But Tara's beauty was working against her from the moment she set foot in the halls. Pretty girls didn't want to be her friend because she was pretty, and therefore a threat to the established Pretty Girl Hierarchy. Cool guys wanted to be her friend, but only for the time it would take them to gain access to her pants. Uncool guys held their breath, hoping she might be different from the established pretty girl hierarchy and actually talk to them. Your Recorder will not divulge which of these groups he belonged to.

The reason the Pretty Girl Hierarchy (referred to, henceforth, as the PGH) was so threatened can be traced back to a single document. This document has joined the fabric of St. Bartholomew mythology. Students and scholars alike have debated for years about its actual existence. Some claim it was laid down in the form of a calendar, some say a weekly planner, and many claim that such a ridiculous document could never have existed at all. Yet through dedicated investigation and research, your Recorder has uncovered the truth. The testimony of a defector from the hierarchy itself confirms the existence of what has alternately been called the Hot Sheet, the Slut Schedule, and the Pecking Order. The form of this fabled item, it turns out, was an Excel file. PGH called it The Spread.

The Spread marked down every starting athlete, every preppy model-type, and every faux-burnt-out rocker in the whole of St Bartholomew's, 24 all told (200 students in the class, 100 of them guys—half are good looking; only half of that half are good looking enough for PGH). It then presented a month-by-month breakdown of which popular girl would be dating each hot guy, and at what interval, for the remainder of our time at St. Bartholomew's. Deviation from The Spread was not permissible, an offense that would have you cast out of the elite group of popular girls. Wiggle room of 1-2 weeks was allowed because of the sometimes unpredictable nature of relationships—occasionally, extra recovery time had to be allotted—but to exceed this limit you would need the express approval of a two-thirds majority of the popular girls (there were about twelve of them—the number fluctuated as girls were kicked out and subsequently welcomed back in). Approval was rarely granted.

Our high school didn't exactly function like the ones in the movies. There was no deliciously catty ringleader of these girls, though some have come forward in recent years and attempted to take credit. As far as the sources of this recorder go, The Spread was started as a joke at a sophomore slumber party, and it morphed into something ugly and inflexible simply by the collected will of PGH to sexually dominate the desirable males of St B's. You can understand that with such a stiff schedule, PGH

of St B's could not allow for changes to be made, just because some pretty new girl, some Jewish girl, was trying to crowd their scene. A line in the sand had to be drawn. You were with PGH or you were against them. And Tara Kinder, with her olive-tinted skin and her nose, not over-large, simply distinguished, perhaps avian, Tara Kinder with her new Schoolbells uniforms and strange aloofness easily mistaken for coldness (that might have, actually, been coldness, depending), she was against them. So PGH had no choice but to bring in Keith Linklater.

Keith Linklater was a secret slut, or he would have been known, had his chromosomal pattern been different. To the world, he presented the face of a charming athlete, the self-deprecating basketball player who spent his weekends volunteering to coach inner-city kids—half his weekends, at any rate. The other half was spent unleashing all manner of perversions on more women at St. Bartholomew's than it will ever be possible to tally: his own count is as exaggerated as Wilt Chamberlain's, and any of the PGH involved will most likely deny any involvement. His name was stricken early from the Spread because so many members of the PGH had slept with him already.

Your Recorder remembers feeling, like many males in his social stratum, an initial fondness for Keith Linklater. He seemed, for perhaps the first five weeks of freshman year (measured in high school time as both an eternity and a blur), to be the jock with the heart of gold, an athlete who looked out for the little guy, courteous to all. Then it was discovered that he all but deflowered a pretty girl in art class, not part of the popular clique but beautiful nonetheless, one who had treated your then braces-bound Recorder with some dignity and respect—Linklater had had some significant sexual contact with this girl, and he refused to subsequently call her or even talk to her in the halls. Knowledge of this sexual encounter was enough to arouse in the sub-stratum guys of St. Bartholomew's a hatred for Keith Linklater that lasted until graduation, and, in some cases, beyond (see documentation on the Great Face Punching of 2009 involving Linklater and the St. B's salutatorian of 2007).

Nothing escaped the popular girls' notice. In addition to their rigid schedule that permeated the social lives of a select few at St B's (and by extension of admiration, most of the rest of us), they had spies, willing wannabes, in almost every class, with missions to report back any possible violations of The Spread. It came to their attention that Tara and the sleaze factory known as Linklater were in the same chemistry lab. Words had been exchanged, mostly rudimentary hellos and basic inquiries about grades, but to the popular girls, this was enough. In Linklater they had found the weapon they would use to destroy the reputation of the interloper. The popular girls had an operative in the classroom, one who gigglingly teased Tara about her non-conversations with Linklater in a manner designed to make Tara feel welcomed and flattered. Tara was not impressed. She smelled a phony, but did not (how could she have?), pick up on the larger conspiracy. Three (or four) weeks into the school year, the faker received her instructions to make a move. She invited Tara to the popular girls table, one of the highest honors of lunch at St. B's. Before then Tara had been hanging on to the end of tables she knew to contain juniors, making the minimum effort to follow conversation but never faking laughter. An invitation to the popular girls' table signalled prestige, a possible moving up in the St. B's food chain. Many of the lower-tier girls would have done horrible things to be in Tara's position. Tara herself was indifferent to the status of these girls. She was mildly excited by the prospect of making friends, but knew enough of the ways of women to be skeptical of the clique. Her life for the next two years may have been simpler had she been even more skeptical and rejected the invitation. But alternate histories are not a specialty of your Recorder, not due to a failure of imagination, but to too much: the branching consequences of even the smallest "might-have-beens" could fill shelves, even in the insignificant life of Tara Kinder.

Not many people know that the idea of going on a date with Keith Linklater was proposed to Tara as a group date. Something fun like a movie, no pressure, just an excuse for us girls to hang out. Plus, he's kind of cute. It's easy to imagine Tara granting PGH requisite laughter, albeit the weak kind, and agreeing to go to the movies that Friday. The lunch was Monday. As the week progressed, the

popular girls called off due to illness, fights with boyfriends, and other *dei ex machina*. By the end of the school week, it was just Tara and Keith. The lamb and the wolf. The flower, and the deflowerer.

The official version of the date is this: Tara gave Linklater a blowjob at Bleaker's Point. But anyone who's ever been part of any story could tell you how wrong the official version so often is. Through research, your Recorder has been able to locate the actual location where said blowjob took place: the mind of Keith Linklater.

The real story is this: The date followed the normal high school first date trajectory: dinner, a movie, most likely a subpar teen comedy, coffee or hot chocolate at Starbuck's. Then Keith invited Tara to Bleaker's Point. Bleaker's Point is the most popular destination for sexual activity of any kind for students of St. Bartholomew's High. Condoms have been so liberally strewn into the surrounding bushes and trees that the local ecosystem now consists entirely of slugs that have learned to feed on rubber. Tara, ignorant of St B's custom, heard "Point" and thought of a cliff of some kind, when in reality the "point" is an arbitrary fabrication, the locale itself is no more than an empty parking lot for an abandoned baseball diamond near the woods.

It is said that upon arrival at the Point, Tara promptly unzipped Keith's pants and proceeded to go about her duties as though she were a pleasure-programmed robot. In reality, the closest she came to Keith's crotch was to patronizingly pat him on the knee. "I have to get home," she would have said, something curt and lightly condescending. There would be no hesitancy in her voice, no fear, nothing Linklater could twist to his advantage. The train of his mojo had hit the brick wall of her independence. What could he do to salvage the night, his pride, his reputation? It was likely in the dark moments when Linklater dropped of Tara without so much as a peck goodnight that he began to suffer from the disease we'll call Linklater Syndrome.

Tara did not mind the whole of St. Bartholomew's thinking she had performed oral sex on Keith Linklater. What she did not count on was a sudden spike in Linklater Syndrome among the male population of St. B's. Linklater Syndrome is the name for a condition coined by your very own recorder describing an affliction common among adolescent males from ages 14 to 25. It involves the self-generated creation of a sexual encounter—in our case, the prime example being Keith's imaginary blowjob from Tara—and the subsequent spreading of this encounter to all other males willing to listen. Often these encounters stem from masturbatory visions occurring with such frequency, the male is no longer able to distinguish the fantasy from reality. Often this encounter will take root in the minds of other males until it becomes part of their imagined sexual experience as well. Thus, one imagined sexual encounter multiplies itself exponentially.

Tara was not aware of the potentially devastating affects of the spread of Linklater Syndrome when she brushed off blowjob rumors. What would come to bother Tara in the months that followed was the way people, in particular guys, treated her in the months that followed. Tara's diminished reputation gave girls a licence to openly whisper about her and laugh as she walked by their lunch table. It gave guys free reign, in their minds, over Tara and her body.

It started off tame—wolf whistles, cat calls, and the like. It escalated, as Tara's reputation lowered, to the use of dirty pickup lines and, eventually, by the hand a sophomore of all people, open ass-grabbing. She could have decked the kid like she possibly decked Roger, but she gave one of her trademark manhood-shrivelling glares and walked away. Tara had been disrespected before, but even in the darkest days of the post-Roger tormenting no boy had dared to place a hand upon what some considered to be her finest feature.

Boys, she knew, didn't do that to a girl they felt they should respect. The popular girls had accomplished their goal—Tara was a slut, and she didn't have to give so much as a handjob. That ass-

grab was an important day in the sexual history of Tara Kinder. On that day she took the advice of the film noirs and plotted her revenge.

About a month after the notorious Ass Grab of the Sophomore Hall, there was a noticeable disturbance in the PGH. It was hard to put a finger on initially, because to the general public, they would acknowledge no troubles inside the clique. It took us a week to figure out the one of their number, a brassy volleyball star named Stephanie Trippi, had been without boyfriend for almost a whole month—a length of bachelorettehood unheard of for one in the popular clique. To hear Stephanie talk (indeed, it was hard not to), she'd really like to be dating preppy Mike Wentbrick, but a certain somebody that she wouldn't name was hooking up with him, even though everyone knew she'd (insert crude blowjob gesture here) to Keith Linklater not a month after arriving at school.

At this, the less informed among us turned our heads—Tara Kinder was dating? It seemed out of character, particularly if her boyfriend was Wentbrick, a guy about as deep as a hole in a sandbox. And it turned out she wasn't *dating* him, per se, but there was something physical going on. We saw it in the way their bodies torqued towards one another in the halls, the undeniable display of chemistry at work—something the lower stratum could only observe. They were on a plane between platonic friendship and going steady. They were, in the words of PGH, “talking,” although the process didn't seem to involve too much talking. Mainly, “hooking up,” that shadowy, sinewy word. When the lower stratum used it, it could apply generously to French kissing or the clumsy, over-the-shirt groping that was the most sex any of us had ever engaged in. When the popular kids said “hooking up,” we weren't exactly sure what it meant, but we knew it was something beyond first base.

Whatever was going on, it seemed the days of completely independent Tara were over. In the ambiguity of the “talking” relationship, sophomore creeps and other reckless boys that had taunted her steered clear (an effect your Recorder believes was calculated on Tara's part). The lower stratum of St.

Bartholomew's boys said they were pissed Tara was taken, and continued to nurse crushes exactly as they had before.

It was hardly a month before Tara was seen in the halls with another guy. This was Richard Noice, a wrestler: short, stocky, with a smile even lower-stratum males had to admit was charming as hell. Still not Tara's type, according to commonly-held belief among hopeful bottom-feeders. Yet when we all returned from Christmas break, she'd moved on to track champion Anthony Wallace. It seemed Tara was taking trophy-winners as trophies. It was almost as though she were going down a list of the most desirable guys in the school.

To this day, there is no evidence that Tara was able to obtain The Spread. But if you will permit your Recorder to enter the realm of speculation, it would explain quite a bit of atypical behavior on Tara's part. Take her "hook-ups", the guys with whom she was "talking" (seven in total, by the end). If Tara had access to The Spread, she would know exactly which boys to target. Junior year there were record numbers of single popular girls. The Spread would allow Tara to make sure she could never be accused of stealing a boy from PGH—as long as the "talking" began in the short window between the post-breakup phase from one girl and the "talking" phase of the next. How she might have obtained The Spread is hotly debated to this day, each theory wilder than the next. Some have credited Tara with secret computer hacking skills, others have concocted a lesbian affair between Tara and one of the now outed girls from PGH. Your Recorder will simply state his belief that Tara was a clever and crafty girl, and leave it at that. For that reason Tara was able to do exactly what PGH feared she would do—steal their men.

The private reaction within the ranks of PGH remains a matter for speculation. The public reaction, however, is well documented. They ditched the subtle conspiracies of their early attempts to discredit Tara and began a vicious public smear campaign. It was obvious Tara was a slut, they'd tell

wannabes hanging on every word. Look at the number of guys she was going through (though, truth be told, Tara's pace of approximately one per month was not much faster than the standard six weeks PGH allotted for their relationships). Even the most loyal of lackies was reluctant to accept this as gospel. Hadn't she been in pseudo-relationships with those guys, after all? And rumor was she hadn't yet "done it" with any of her special male friends. The guys would inflate the importance of their sexual encounters, but always fold under questioning. Did it make her a slut if she just gave blowjobs? Of *course* she was still a slut, PGH would respond. But what about all those service hours in the soup kitchens? the lackies would ask. This, your Recorder believes, is how the name Mother Theresa first came about.

It was a rare stroke of narrative cleverness on PGH's part, to take Tara's reputations and work them against one another. People laughed when they heard it, but uneasily—they weren't exactly sure why they were laughing (a phenomenon more common than Linklater Syndrome to the common American high schooler). No one was exactly sure if we were criticizing her or canonizing her.

By October of Tara's senior year, the name "Mother Theresa" was irrevocable. She existed in people's phones as such. Photoshopped images of her face superimposed into a nun's blue habit circulated among PGH and the meaner-spirited popular guys. It may have been this last bit that inspired Tara's response to the name.

You may have noticed that your Recorder has, for the most part, kept his own involvement in this History to a minimum. Like any good chronicler of past events, he knows that he must separate himself from his material to give a proper and subjective history. There come times in the recording of Histories, however, when that separation becomes impossible. Fate convened to bring your Recorder and Tara together at the Halloween party of that year, a night that would have serious ramifications for the rest of this History.

Your Recorder was dressed as a priest, a costume he intended to be ironic that most of his peers took to be sincere (a mark, it should be noted, of the wide gulf between your Recorder's sense of humor and that of his peers). Tara, with (as our Latin instructor would have said) all the subtlety of a rubber crutch in a polio ward, had chosen to capitalize on the Madonna-whore dichotomy that characterized her image at school, her nickname—really much of her teenage life. She came to the party dressed as none other than Mother Theresa—sexy Mother Theresa.

Now hers was not the most revealing of costumes that year, not by a long shot. Were it not for Tara's appearance, partygoers would still discuss Nicki Tomsick's backless cat costume, Rachel Wentworth's Daisy Duke (prominently featuring a backside that has since then expanded to epic proportions), and Leslie Tomsick's revealing twist on a Minnie Mouse outfit. But Tara's left no room for such memories.

The party itself was tolerable by the standards of Tara's—and your Recorder's—generation. It had the requisite blaring rap music, the kegs with warm beer, and the permeating scent of Axe products hanging over the proceedings. Guys shuffled around in costumes that took minimal effort or creativity. Your Recorder remembers counting four pimps and seven different gangsters or various mafiosi. There was a Zorro somewhere about, but like his namesake he constantly disappeared and reappeared elsewhere.

Your Recorder, it must be stated, was at a bit of a crossroads occasioned by his recent eighteenth birthday. He had looked through the photo albums compiled by his parents and realized the progression of his life lacked narrative. There were few characters in the story, mostly your Recorder and his companions in the lower stratum. The only part of it that could be called an epic were in the books he'd read and the video games he'd played. There is a reason, dear reader, that this volume is not called "The Sexual History of Your Recorder."

Faced with this existential crisis of meaning, your Recorder, if he may be permitted to say, was not paralyzed by his life's meaninglessness. He decided to go out make his own history. He had gone to the party with that intent—not, in the parlance of his times, to “get laid”, not even to “hook up”—but to mark the beginning of his life's story.

Of course upon arrival at the party, it seemed an excellent idea for your eighteen-year-old Recorder to jump-start this history by getting drunk. His experience with drink, at that time, did not extend far beyond the contents of the chalice at Mass and the meagre servings of wine allotted by his parents on holidays. To his delight, the mediocre beer supplied opened his mind to the possibilities of socialization. Hey, hey would say as he passed his fellow party-goers, holding up his Dixie cup in salute. What's up. They responded in turn. Amazing that social interaction among his peers could be so simple. When Tara made her grand entrance, it may just have been the beer, but your Recorder could have sworn she had a faint glow about her. Did that fire belong to St Elmo, or to hell? Depends on who you ask. At that moment your Recorder couldn't care less. His days of admiration from afar, that chivalrous bullshit, were done.

Your Recorder waited until Tara was not engaged in conversation. It didn't take long—no one seemed to have any idea what to say. Historically, your Recorder screwed up conversations with girls within the first five seconds, his main problem being that he would overthink his approach. In the infamous Mithril Incident of '02, he blurted out a piece of Lord of the Rings trivia instead of saying hello. Thanks in part to the beer, your Recorder gave a simple Hello this time.

Tara regarded your Recorder with a vague wariness, as though sizing up a Bible salesman before he made a pitch (which, given your Recorder's costume that Halloween, was not that far from the truth). She was not, as females often seemed, entirely disgusted by his approach, so he moved forward with

conversation efforts, explaining with much bumbling and half-complete phrasing their connection through AP English class.

“I know who you are,” said Tara, not entirely in a dismissive way.

Your Recorder asked, You do? He tried to keep surprise and joy from his voice.

“Yeah,” said Tara “You ask a lot of questions.”

Your Recorder, it must be admitted, blushed at this observation, for it had been acknowledged by so few. And Tara’s observation did not seem as though it were made wholly out of annoyance. Your Recorder responded that indeed, he asked many questions, but only because he enjoyed the material. Your Recorder, terrified of a break in conversation, asked if she enjoyed the class as well.

“I’m more of a movie person,” said Tara, biting the edge of her Dixie cup. Your Recorder noticed here the evenly spaced bite marks she had placed on the rim of the cup, going almost halfway around. It made him happy to see these marks. Here, at last, was evidence of Tara’s humanity—not sluttishness or sainthood. She bit her cups. She had quirks, she did things that were neither in the service of her selflessness or sexiness. She may have noticed your Recorder’s appraisal of her cup, because she laughed and said “Sorry, I’m a little drunk.”

Your Recorder told her there was no need to apologize, and in the history of his banal conversations, too numerous to be recorded by all the Word documents of the world, never before has a throwaway phrase been imbued with such sincerity.

Conversation seemed to be progressing in the style normal for the times when the Zorro reappeared from the shadows.

“The nun and the priest,” he said, as if in respectful acknowledgement.

“And the prick,” said Tara.

Zorro smiled. “It’s good to see you again Tara.” Up close, your Recorder took note that he was well-built, and tanner than any of the seniors at the party. It was possible he did not attend St. Bartholomew’s.

Tara rolled her eyes. This seemingly unprovoked annoyance at a friendly guy came as a surprise to your Recorder. “Nice costume,” she said. “Really original.” Your Recorder had expected Tara to possess a quick wit and a sharp tongue, but this unwarranted meanness surprised him.

“It’s a classic,” said Zorro. “It might be making a comeback.”

“Sorry, do you even go to school here?” she said.

Zorro stepped back and bowed theatrically. “I bid you *adios*.”

Tara turned to exchange a look with your Recorder, the “What a loser, right?” look.

And your Recorder could easily have placated her just to keep conversation going. But in the moment he was feeling sympathy for a man shot down, as far as he could tell, for no reason. Maybe it was the beer that loosened his tongue so, but before he realized it your Recorder said, “Wow Mother Theresa, you’re kind of an asshole.”

For an instant Tara’s eyebrows shot up in a way that your Recorder imagined might be preceding a slap. Instead she burst into laughter, loud enough to attract the attention of surrounding partygoers. Your Recorder began to laugh as well, and the two of them stood there, to the bafflement of other partygoers, carrying on like, well, two drunken teenagers. When it was over Tara put a hand on your Recorder’s shoulder to steady herself.

“You’re funny,” she said, wiping a tear from her eye. “You know that?”

Your Recorder hadn't known that he was funny to anyone other than himself. Hearing this assurance from someone else was vindicating in ways he could not, before then, have imagined. If he had, he may not have waited to talk to Tara for as long as he did. It was in this moment that the seeds for the writing of this History were planted.

Had your Recorder written these events down in fiction, as he originally planned, this might be the moment when he and the object of his affection began to passionately make out and then start dating. History, of course, did not take this route. What followed this event was a friendship that was perhaps better for your Recorder than these idle fantasies. It's true that the friendship did not extend far beyond English class and the occasional chat in the senior lounge, but there was a respect between your Recorder and Tara not found between most members of the opposite sex in St. Bartholomew.

This is not to say that the relationship consisted entirely of platonic feelings on both sides. Your Recorder nursed his crush on Tara Kinder for some time, hoping against the norm of his stratum that Tara might cross unthinkable boundaries and date him someday. Yet it was different than before, easier to bear and not as serious when one had a real relationship with the object of one's affection. It became easier to suppress these feelings, actually, when Tara started dating Roger Abood again.

Here you must forgive your Recorder a transgression in the writing of this history: he deliberately withheld that the identity of the Zorro from the party was Roger. In fairness to your Recorder, his wish was to recount the history as it unfolded to him. He did not realize the identity of the Zorro until months later, when the old couple was reunited. It seemed Roger had been missing his special friend from third grade. He was filled with remorse for the hell his friends had put her through. He had reformed his militaristic zeal for sex enough to respect Tara's boundaries. And again he wore her down, gently this time, until she was ready to forgive him and date him again.

There can be little doubt that Roger was a better boyfriend the second time around. Tara was known to find surprise flowers or candy in her locker after school. He gave her rides from school when she couldn't bear to spend much more time with her mother. When he'd pull up his car to pick her up, he'd give me a respectful nod to your Recorder, for whom keeping Tara company after school was the best part of many of his days.

Your Recorder would like to claim that he was happy for the couple, that he was content to be only a friend to Tara, but he must admit this was not the case. For months he was tormented by jealous thoughts, and there were days he avoided Tara altogether for fear of letting his bitterness show. He was having trouble forgiving Tara for a crime she had never committed. Then spring of '07 came, and with it the prospect of seldom, if ever, seeing Tara again. Your Recorder was leaving Ohio and heading to the Northeast, where he planned to spend the rest of his days writing a sexual history of his own, while Tara was accompanying Roger to one of the local state colleges. Almost too late, your Recorder began to learn to let go. Sometimes, your Recorder has learned, it is enough to have the touch of a pretty girl on your arm, a bit of human contact to let you know that you're alive, that you too have a story, one that someday may be worth telling.

Tara and Roger again survived the odds, remaining together, to your Recorder's knowledge, for all four years of college. Roger had not forgotten his promise for military service, he had merely altered it. He has been an ROTC student these past four years, and soon, when graduation occurs, he will begin his military service. Whether he and Tara will be able to withstand this test, more difficult, surely, than any other they have faced, remains to be seen. Your Recorder, however, has hope.

This brings us to the present and thus the end, for now, of our sexual history. But a note must be added, based only on conjecture and observation on the part of your Recorder. Judging by the intimacy that radiated from Tara and Roger those last months of high school, different from any of Tara's prior

relationships, there can be little doubt that Tara at last made good on her promise to Roger from many years ago. Tara had a new glow; not one that came from sainthood or sluthood, but from a strong feeling your Recorder hesitates to name.

Harram

The Lebanese were doctors, bankers, or successful restaurant owners, but Phil's father was none of these things, which was where his troubles began. Ramses Maloof was, depending on who you asked in the family, a drunk, a fuck-up, a *harram*. No one had heard from him in years. At Maloof family gatherings—massive gatherings, it seemed half the Maloofs in Lebanon had settled in Northeast Ohio—aunts and uncles asked Phil about his dad like he was a benign tumor, an embarrassing cyst Phil would have to have removed. Voices would drop: “Have you spoken to your father?” The answer was invariably no. Since Phil had no accomplishments to speak of, no claims to fame other than his deadbeat dad, the relation would soon wander off, muttering about finding some more *khibbi* or baklava.

If one good thing could be said about Ramses, it was that he made great *arak*. “The best in Beirut,” swore family and strangers in restaurants, in church basements. “The best I ever had.” After leaving his family he had known brief success in Beirut running a small-scale distillery out of his basement, selling to area nightclubs and liquor stores. The operation had tanked when, as family speculated, he had sampled too much of the supply. “The product was excellent,” Ramses’ cousin, Phil’s Uncle Samir, had confided to him once, “but the business plan was not so good.” Ramses’ *arak* was the only part of his life that would grant him favorable comparison to Samir. The two had grown up close, but their lives had taken separate paths. Samir was a successful Beirut banker with a big family; his *arak*, though, you could use it to wash the windows of your car.

Phil had never tried his father’s *arak*, though the man had sent a bottle from Beirut almost every year since he left Phil and his mother. Phil was six then. He was twenty-two now, and he still had not tasted the *arak*. The bottles piled up on top of the kitchen cabinet and collected dust. They were the only evidence left that the man had ever existed. They were still there, unopened, when the call came in from Samir that Ramses had been discharged for non-payment from an Egyptian hospital and Samir was paying to have him life-flighted to Beirut.

Phil wasn't sure where to begin. "What was he doing in Egypt? How long was he over there?"

"Who knows, *ibni*?" said Samir, his voice weary over the phone. He often called Phil 'son' in Arabic, and Phil appreciated this, though Samir, a father late in life, looked old enough to be his grandfather. "Scamming tourists in Cairo, I would bet. How long, I don't know, it could have been a year."

"What does he have?" Phil asked.

"Bladder cancer. It comes on fast, and he waited so fucking long to go in, they didn't catch it until it was advanced..." His uncle's voice trailed off. "Can I speak to your *immi*, Phil?"

"*Ami*." Phil wanted to say, I'm not a kid anymore, don't jerk me around, but he still hesitated before asking, "How long does he have?"

Samir sighed. "Maybe a couple of months."

Phil's mother was skeptical. "So fucking typical," she said. Nahla had married Ramses young, eighteen to his thirty-two, and she was nineteen when she gave birth to Phil, their only child. She was still, to Phil at least, beautiful and young and immature, as if her development had been seized upon crossing US borders and had not been released since. Maybe it was this shared youth that drove them to fight often and with passion, slamming doors, throwing plates, even once ripping a drawer from its cupboard before apologies were exchanged.

"What do you mean?" said Phil, defending his father, as he had since he was six, on instinct. He was considering pulling the latest bottle of *arak* down from its shelf, not to suppress emotions but to call them forth. He knew the news should make him sad, or angry like Nahla, but what he felt curiosity more than anything. He hadn't seen his father since an ill-fated trip to Lebanon when he was thirteen, and he wanted to see if the man's degradation had slowed since then or kept on going.

"Of course he chooses this week of all weeks to die," said Nahla. She scrubbed pots in the cramped kitchen of their apartment, a kitchen that smelled always of cinnamon and garlic and *basal*. It

was Phil's apartment, and he couldn't smell it himself, but the few guests they had over would comment on it. He knew the smell from the way it hung about his mother's clothes, the same smell of the house of his *Siti* and *Jidi*'s house in Aitaneet. He'd seen them there once, before they'd passed away. To Phil it was the smell of a home he could never quite attain.

"Maybe he can't help it," said Phil, but he had to agree the timing was piss-poor. He was supposed to graduate from Lakeland Community College in two weeks. Instead of applying for entry-level jobs like his classmates, Phil was "taking a year off." This meant smoking weed and delivering pizzas to save for a trip to visit his cousin Tariq in Beirut, where he would smoke more weed (called there *hashish*). Tariq and his father, Phil's Uncle Samir, had put Ramses in Beirut's best hospital and covered the bills, no room for debate. Lebanese men fought fiercely for the privilege of paying the check when it was brought to the table. It was the Lebanese way.

"*Hudda*," Nahla said, Arabic for 'bullshit.' It was a common curse at the apartment. "Your *abi* is a con man. It's just some scheme to get you out there right when you're about to graduate." Nahla wanted Phil to get the college degree she had never received. Phil's commitment to his education had been the subject of many spats. The security deposit Nahla was fronting Phil on an apartment of his own for the summer was contingent upon his graduating at the start of May.

"I've got two weeks," Phil said, half-hearted. He knew his mother believed with absolute conviction that Ramses was dying just to piss her off. Fifteen years had done little to diminish her anger at her absentee husband, the one who'd fled the country so fast he didn't have time to sign divorce papers. Maybe the constant fighting in the apartment was made worse by the lack of a buffer: Nahla had not remarried in the years since Ramses disappeared, had hardly dated.

"You've got tests. You've got papers." Ramses had claimed debt and legal troubles with one of his fast-cash entrepreneurial schemes—the last one in Cleveland, Phil was pretty sure, had been a chain of parking lots—as reasons for leaving, but this, Nahla had told Phil since he was nine, was just pretense.

Ramses left, Nahla told her son, because he was a drunk, because he couldn't handle the simple expectations placed upon him of being a father and a husband. Phil did not want to believe this at first, could not, and it took many years for him to begin to change his mind.

"We've got to leave soon," Phil said. "We don't know how much time he's got left." When Ramses left Phil had tried many times to remind Nahla of the good times he remembered: Ramses and Phil playing catch, Ramses taking Phil to kid movie matinees, Ramses kneading bulgar into khibbi with his hairy fists. It was only with much prodding by Nahla that Phil remembered Ramses arriving from the bar on late nights, sometimes crawling out of the car, staring at his son with a glassy-eyed expression of unfamiliarity. "He's dying, remember?"

Nahla re-scrubbed her pots now, harder than before. "If he's dying," she said, "he can wait until you've finished college."

The next day the house was inundated with calls from Maloof family and friends. Word had spread, it seemed, to the entire Lebanese population of northeast Ohio, and caller ID was lit up with Nahases and Aboods, with Hiekels and Haddads. Phil resented the calls. Extended family had not called half so often before this, and with their eager questions, the barely suppressed anticipation in their voices, they seemed to him like rubberneckers waiting for an accident. "Don't know how long. Two months, maybe," he would say, and grunt monosyllabic replies until they'd ask for his *immi*. The worst part, he thought, was the way they hesitated before asking what he was doing after college, as if it were only a matter of time before he became Ramses Part II. What made Phil mad was his fear, unacknowledged, that Ramses II was exactly what he would become.

Phil had always got on well with Tariq and Samir in Beirut, but he'd always felt he and Nahla were to some extent excluded from the Cleveland Lebanese. It may have been the stigma of divorce, the specter of his no-good father hovering overhead, or it may have been Nahla's abrasive manner, her obvious dislike for many of her former in-laws. Or it may have been Phil's fault. He had no

accomplishments his mother could brag about save delivering pizza. Worse, he possessed no visible interest in his culture. He hadn't joined St Maron's Youth Group, hadn't learned anything more advanced than rudimentary Arabic until college, and even then only got three classes in before dropping the minor. His father was the one who spoke Arabic around the house, who reminded Phil, drunk or otherwise, to be proud of his Lebanese heritage. If Ramses had stayed, Phil couldn't help thinking, maybe things would be different.

"When are you going over to see him?" asked one of the Shibleys.

"After I graduate." Phil covered the receiver and shouted upstairs to Nahla, "Did you get the tickets yet?"

"Tonight," she said.

There were no tickets bought that night. The next day, Phil asked her about it, and she claimed she was shopping around for the travel rates. No tickets were bought that day either. By the third day, Wednesday, Phil's insistence turned to anger and another of their fights ensued. They shouted without shame, made ugly accusations. Phil's academic failings, numerous, were re-hashed.

"We've waited fifteen years for him to come home," said Nahla. "He can wait two weeks to see you." It was true that six-year-old Phil had spent weeks searching the neighborhood for Ramses, even as Nahla insisted he wasn't coming home. The closest he came to finding Ramses was the action movies on TNT where dark-skinned bearded men wore turbans and plotted explosions. For years, when watching these movies, he cheered silently for the bad guys.

"Maybe he doesn't have two weeks," said Phil. Phil hadn't been waiting for Ramses to come home, not for years. He preferred the strong and handsome Ramses of his memory to the man in real life. When Phil visited Beirut as a teen, he and his father failed to connect on a level so fundamental that he paid extra to leave Lebanon three days early. By the time he went back after high school, Ramses had left the country and hadn't been heard from until Samir got the call from the hospital in Egypt.

Nahla must have sensed she was losing, because she threw down her most powerful gauntlet. “Has he asked to see you?” she demanded. “Has he asked, on his deathbed, to see his only son?”

Phil couldn’t answer, but it didn’t matter. He wanted to see Ramses, even if it was just out of curiosity. When the shouting was over, they agreed Phil did not need to be physically present at the graduation ceremony, though not seeing him walk would nearly break Nahla’s heart, and tomorrow they would buy plane tickets for after Phil’s finals were finished.

But he lay awake that night, tormented by the thought that their flight would be too late. He called his cousin Tariq—it was afternoon in Beirut—and found his father’s condition was “pretty fuckin bad.”

Phil thought, then, of his most complete memory of his father. In the memory Phil was five, or maybe six. He sat on his father’s lap reading the Sunday funnies while Ramses read a book by Khalil Gibran. Ramses would often lean forward to better see a word, and when he did his face would brush Phil’s cheek. His whiskers would scrape Phil’s face and he would laugh. Nothing was said because nothing had to be. It was the only day of this kind Phil remembered.

“I don’t want to mess up your plans, cuz,” said Tariq, “but I hope you’re coming here soon.”

“We are,” said Phil. He hung up and bought two tickets to Lebanon for Friday. He knew his mother would be furious, but he also knew she’d never let the money he spent on the tickets—four figures for a last-minute flight—go to waste. It was the Lebanese way.

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Nahla refused to pack her suitcase until an hour before they had to leave for their flight. Phil had convinced her to go only by swearing that he’d e-mailed his instructors and received permission to take his finals at a later date, which was three-quarters true: he’d heard back from everyone except his airheaded economics professor. Nahla complained the entire ride to the airport. She warned Phil that she would be searched at security. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy—even without her foreign accent and

dark skin, the expression of murder on her face as she walked through the metal detectors would have been enough to warrant a search on any woman.

They took a cab to the airport. Phil had stopped Nahla from requesting rides from Maloof cousins she didn't like anyway by calling the cab. It was forty-five minutes from their apartment in traffic, and Phil's cell phone went off with increasingly frequent updates on Ramses' health. There had been a steep decline yesterday evening. Phil's fears appeared valid, which only made Nahla angrier than she'd been before. She sat, arms crossed, in silence until a report of a well-known rock singer re-checking into rehab came on the radio.

"*Haram*," she said quietly, like a blessing. It meant "poor soul," and it was a judgment she proclaimed with surprising gentleness. Phil had always been fascinated with the term's exacting requirements. To make *haram* status took an earnest commitment to failure. If a man lost his home or family in a tragedy of Job-like proportions, he might be able to attain instant *haram* status. But mostly, it seemed, you had to work for it.

"He's a *haram*?" said Phil. "That guy?" The homeless and mentally ill, in pictures and on the news, were harrams. Alcoholics, gambling addicts who lost their mortgages, these were harrams as long as they were sorry for their failures. The bullies who picked on Phil in middle school had *haram* status as well, though it was hard for Phil to feel that way when they had him in a half-nelson. That was a key distinguishing factor—you couldn't be a *haram* and in power. It just wasn't in your nature. Politicians, no matter how crippling their addictions or embarrassing their scandals, were never harrams to Nahla; they were assholes all the time.

"He needs help," Nahala said. That was all she would say to explain herself, or sometimes, "He needs prayers." Which was as religious as she ever got.

Another strange qualification, Phil came to realize with time, was that you couldn't be physically present and still be a *haram*. A homeless man could be a *haram* in the abstract, but when he breathed

in Nahla's face to ask for change, she would curse at him in Arabic and walk briskly away. And you could never ask for haram status: Tariq's older brother Bahij got the Arabic characters for it tattooed on his bicep after a break-up, and Nahla talked about how stupid it was for weeks.

"*Immi*, this guy cheats on his wife every city he goes on tour," he said. "I bet he shoots heroin into his eyeballs."

"So he needs help."

Phil was angry now at Nahla's refusal to quantify her designations. "He's a horrible person. I can't believe you feel sorry for that asshole."

"*Ibni*," Nahla said, scolding. The driver, an Arab himself, was looking at them in his rearview. Now they couldn't even curse in Arabic, which was mostly the limitation of Phil's linguistic skills. Phil had tried and failed to study Arabic as a minor, and he remembered learning that *haram* pronounced with a hard 'a' was a word for all things forbidden in Islamic culture. But it was not to be confused with its cousin *harram*, just as no Lebanese Christian was ever to be confused with a Muslim. Almost without exception, the Lebanese Phil knew were Maronite and Melchite Catholic, and they identified as Americans foremost—patriots, not terrorists, thank you very much. The separation was so severe that Nahla had barely given the cabbie a *marhaba* in his native tongue before switching to English with Phil and ignoring their driver the rest of the ride.

In the airport, Phil called Tariq before the flight. "How is he doing?"

"They have him on morphine," said Tariq. "He's talking some crazy shit right now. I'm glad you guys are on your way."

"Flight plan says we'll be there in eighteen hours," said Phil.

"You'll get here sooner, *inshallah*." If God is willing.

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The connecting flight was in Newark. There was an hour to kill before loading so Phil, like the rest of the tourists, put his nose against the glass and studied the skyline of Manhattan across the bay. New York was nine hours from Cleveland by car but may as well have been another hemisphere. Those of Phil's friends lucky enough to go would come back with a light in their eyes, a light that grew dimmer with each passing day away from The City, and regale classmates with tales of a city in perpetual motion.

"What are you looking at this for?" Phil had left Nahla with her gossip rags for some alone time, but she must have finished them quickly.

"Greatest city in the world, Ma," said Phil, mostly to get her goat. He knew New York underwhelmed Nahla, as most acclaimed things did.

"Great city, if you want a \$14 sandwich," she said. "Great city if you want double what we pay in rent now with half the size. Greatest city, my *tezii*."

"What beats it? Is it Beirut?" Phil could never get a consistent opinion from his mother on the homeland. She never spoke highly of it, but she didn't seem too happy about life in the States either.

"Beirut is cheaper."

Phil didn't see any compelling reason to leave Cleveland, not with his mother there unmarried. The only place he'd ever felt the need to flee to was Beirut, but Beirut was different every time he went back, like a blueprint scrapped and redrawn. It was a war zone, then it was the Paris of the Middle East. Beirut was a dream. Its one tenuous anchor to reality was his father, and when he died Phil wondered if the city might not just float away.

"How come you haven't been back?" Phil asked.

Nahla stared off at the New York skyline. "My *abi* and *immi* have been dead a long time. There's no reason for me to go back."

"What about the rest of your family?" Phil asked. In Cleveland, Lebanese families were exhaustingly big. Lebanon was such a small country, its claim to nationhood so tenuous, that those who

shared the heritage stuck together with a fierce pride and looked for connections everywhere: "Oh, your name is Abuhasen? My jidi had second cousins named Abuhasen. We must be related!"

"The rest of my family is you," she said, putting her arm gruffly around his neck. "Besides, we have plenty of family in Cleveland."

"That's Dad's family," said Phil. "And you don't like them anyway."

Nahla shrugged. "Family is family."

Phil had noticed two or three men on the plane from Cleveland that he thought might be Lebanese, but you could never know for sure. Just as often they were Italian or Greek or, God forbid, Persian. But as they waited in the gate at Newark, there could be no mistaking the congregation of Lebanese forming at their gate. A bald man spoke machine gun Arabic English and French into a cell phone. A woman in a *hijab* hushed her crying two-year-old with frozen yogurt. Three young guys in button-downs traded off headphones blaring loud enough that Phil could hear what sounded like Arabic hip-hop. The reminded him of his cousin Tariq: confident and swarthy, poster children for a Westernized Middle East. The coma that hung over airport gates, the calm before the calm, did not have hold at Gate 36B. The talk was loud, the excitement was palpable.

Phil persisted in his line of questioning. "What about your village? Aitaneet? It couldn't have been that bad."

"I did not live in a great part of town," she said. "Your *abi*'s father was a wealthy man, but I had nothing growing up. And my parents, they were not happy when I married your father."

"*Siti* and *Jidi* didn't like Dad?"

"No, they did not like your *abi* very much. My father told me I shouldn't trust him." She sighed. "Maybe he was right."

Last-minute tickets meant Phil had not been able to get adjacent seats for him and Nahla. He'd given her the window seat and taken a middle one in the back between a snorer and a stooped man in

his sixties. From the minute Phil sat down the man was a talker, but Phil didn't mind. The man was friendly and wanted to talk about Lebanon, and Phil wanted to listen.

"You are going to Beirut?" the man asked. "Beirut is good, yes, but it is not the heart of Lebanon. In Beirut they forget history, they build over everything. Go out and see the mountains, see the cedars. You know the cedar of Lebanon?"

Phil knew. He'd worn it on a chain in junior high, during his chain-wearing phase. He'd stopped when no one knew what it meant. "I saw them a couple times," he said, "when I was a kid."

The old man seemed not to hear him. "Americans, they think Lebanon is a desert with camels, they don't know we have the most beautiful trees in the world. These are the trees that make the Bible. You see them again, before you die. Go to Zahlee and see them."

"My father was from Zahlee," said Phil.

"What was his name?"

For a second Phil hesitated. "Maloof," he said. "Samir Maloof."

He nodded as the man claimed to know a Maloof from Tyre, shocked at his denial. The man was nice, Phil reasoned, and he hadn't wanted to disappoint him. He struggled not to acknowledge the part of him that wished it were true.

Phil had not planned well for the flight. Halfway through his iPod died, and he spent the rest of the flight watching episodes of an Egyptian soap opera on the in-flight screens. The subtitles lagged behind the rapid-fire Arabic, so the rest of the plane laughed and gasped along while Phil stared, uncomprehending, at the screen. Phil had half-formed memories of sitting on his father's lap as he watched grainy videotapes of a similar show. If Ramses had stayed perhaps they would have made this flight together many times, and Phil would be laughing at the screen, understanding every word.

The pilot announced their descent, and out the window Phil could see the grey of mountains speckled with the white of tiny villages and the green of the famous cedars. It had been four years since

he had been back. He found himself smiling, and turned to the old man beside him. The man grinned back through the tears welling up in his eyes.

Phil knew there was something wrong when he turned on his cell phone after debarking and found it lit up with messages. As he and Nahla pushed their way towards baggage claim he listened to voicemails from the past 15 hours in hushed and urgent voices from Tariq and Samir. Ramses' deterioration had accelerated.

"We have to go," he said to Nahla as she struggled to pull her suitcase from the carousel.

"Your bag," she said, but Phil had already run outside to hail a cab. Beirut construction kept them an hour and a half before they reached St. Mark's, and by that time his father had been dead for an hour.

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There was nothing to be done at the hospital. Tariq and Uncle Samir embraced them wordlessly. There were no tears. The doctor asked if they would like a minute alone, and Nahla said no before Phil could protest. "We'll see him at the funeral," she said. Afterwards Phil would wish he had asked to see it then, before the embalmer did his work.

Samir offered to put them up in a hotel for the night and Nahla, playing the role of the fiercely independent widow, refused. They took a room in a hotel not far from St Mark's, the same one where Tariq and his father were staying. Nahla examined the prices and rented a two-bed for her and Phil.

They laid their bags next to their beds and plopped down. "Tomorrow we're taking him back to Aitaneet," Nahla told Phil as they watched the ceiling fan whirl. "We'll have the funeral then."

"Don't you want to wait a day or two?" said Phil.

"For what? All his loved ones to come?"

They were quiet for a while. Nahla said, "At least his *abi* and *ami* aren't around to see him."

"That's a shitty thing to say." Phil sat up in his bed.

"No parents should have to bury their son," she said. But her face was guilty, like times she'd yelled at Phil for something he hadn't done.

"You talk like he's worthless," he said. "I've never heard you say a single good thing about him. But he must have done something right for you to marry him."

Nahla shrugged. "He made great arak. What do you want me to say? He was a con artist."

"What, so he just conned you into marrying him? How about me, was I a con too?"

"Phil, *habbib*, no, of course you weren't." Phil was standing now, his hands on his hips. "Come on, *habib*," said Nahla. "You didn't sleep on the plane. Aren't you tired?"

Phil shook his head. He strode around the room, examining everything, then the bathroom. He poked his head out and said he was going upstairs to see Tariq for a minute. Upstairs, Tariq was just getting out of the shower. He answered the door in a bathrobe.

"I gotta get out of this hotel," said Phil. "Meet you in the café next door? Five o'clock?"

"At five, *inshallah*," said Tariq.

In the café, Phil sat with his plate at the smallest table he could find. Most tables seated at least five or more, and most were full of groups of men and women that cast repeated glances Phil's way.

Five o'clock passed with no Tariq, and Phil thought of his cousin. Tariq was as swarthy as Phil was pale. He exuded the confidence of a man who has led many lines of the *dabke*. Phil had always envied his easy ways with people, particularly women. When people talked about Lebanese destined for success, Tariq was the one they always mentioned. Tariq had graduated from the American University of Beirut last spring. In the fall he'd have worked a year at a job whose yearly salary, in dollars, would have more than double paid the rent for the apartment Phil planned on taking in the summer. It was a banking job, the type of promising entry-level position Phil knew he could have got for himself if he'd bothered to build connections, if he'd done things right. It was as though Phil and Tariq were on parallel tracks to their fathers.

Phil could smell Tariq before he saw him. Between the hospital and now he must've found time to bathe himself in Polo cologne. Phil had seen Tariq in a T-shirt maybe twice in his life; every other time it was button downs, top three undone to show his toned chest. He was the kind of guy who wore glasses all the time, even indoors, and yet you still loved him for it. Tariq was the uber-Arab.

"Fuck you doing here by yourself man?" Tariq spoke English like he spoke Arabic: quickly and without punctuation. Speaking English he often cut off the first two words of his sentences, as though he was perpetually out of breath from leading an impromptu *dabke* line. Phil had come to think of Tariq's speech pattern as an affectation he put on, a way to charm American girls by playing up a foreign accent. But Tariq did it when it was just the two of them as well. Perhaps he always talked that way; perhaps he was trying to charm Phil as well.

Phil didn't know the expected response—in dancing and conversation, he was always two steps behind his cousin. He gestured dumbly to the untouched plate of rolled *kafta* before him. "You told me we'd meet here at five."

Tariq shrugged. "Yeah I was like, we'll meet here at five, *inshallah*."

"If God is willing." Phil rolled his eyes.

"Right man. *Inshallah*. Don't ever trust an Arab to be on time. You should know that by now."

"Your old man says we're not Arabs. We're Phoenicians."

Tariq waved his hand dismissively. "*Abi* talks a lot of shit. We're Syrian, we're Lebanese, who cares? Long as we're not the fuckin *Palestinnii*."

Phil didn't follow politics much, but before he'd dropped his Arabic minor he'd watched a documentary on Palestinian refugees in his culture class. That was the class where the girl with brown hair down to her waist would speak out about Palestinian rights and piss off the one Jewish kid in the classroom off. In her anger she was the prettiest girl Phil had seen on campus, and he hadn't even talked to her.

"We thought we saw a bunch at the airport," he said. "They don't seem that bad."

"*Ma'tkalum*, man, they are the worst. It's like the *abeed* in Cleveland. It's like niggers if they tried to kill you all the time." Tariq laughed. "No, that's not right, they *do* try to kill you all the time. It's like if *abeed* shot rockets at your fuckin house." He pantomimed rocket fire, with sound effects.

Phil thought about a black classmate of his in accounting class, a smart kid who'd worn glasses and offered to sell Phil dope on at least two occasions. "Not every *abed* tries to kill you," he said.

"Course not, they're just talkin shit most of the time. But Philistines will fuck with you for real. That's why I carry this." Tariq lifted his shirt and lifted a dagger curved like an Arabic scythe an inch from its hilt.

"Holy shit." Phil's reaction drew looks and Tariq pulled his shirt down again. "Hey, I'm just foolin, cuz, I just thought it looked cool. But I'm glad you don't dress like an *abed* no more. That was fucked up."

Phil laughed, thinking about his brief period imitating the dress of rappers in high school, surprised Tariq had noticed and remembered. "I left my Sean John shit at home," he told his cousin. "I said to myself, if I wanna get laid by a Lebanese girl, I gotta dress like Tariq, I gotta get a fuckin button-down or some shit." He was falling back quickly to his old repartee with his cousin. It had been four years since Phil's last trip to Beirut, but there was nothing unnatural or forced about their conversation now. It was as though Phil had never left.

"Hey man if you want to get laid, Tariq will get you laid," said Tariq. "We'll get you some *ut*, brother, some sympathy *ut*, that's the best kind." The reference to death cast a pall over the table. "I'm real sorry about your dad cuz," Tariq offered. "That's real fucked up you didn't get to see him before."

"I don't think it would have helped," said Phil. "I mean really, how was he doing towards the end?"

Tariq shook his head. "He had no idea what was up."

"He ask for me?" Phil asked, surprising himself.

Tariq winced. "Like I said, man, he was fucked in the head. I couldn't catch two words out of his mouth. English then Arabic, nonstop. Shit was crazy."

"Like what?" Phil was hoping for some clue to the condition of his father's mind, some last glimpse of his psyche before dying.

"Crazy shit, man, nonsense. One time he was like, *bia al-charlmutat*. Sell the whores. Then he was like, *thakur aruz*. Remember the rice. We thought about asking them to take him off morphine, but *harram eliehu*, do you really want to cause the guy more pain?"

"Right," said Phil. 'Harram' made him think of his argument with Nahla before the flight. "Did he ask about Nahla?" he asked.

Tariq snorted. They both started laughing.

"She thinks Ramses died just to inconvenience us," said Phil.

At this, Tariq started howling. "Classic Nahla," he said. "It was bad timing. I mean you're about to graduate. *Hullus*. School *la bas*. Crazy, right?"

"I know," said Phil. In truth, before the cafe he'd opened an e-mail from his economics professor explaining that, regretfully, he would not be able to make up his final exam under any circumstances, so he should cancel his flight or accept an incomplete for the class. Phil had deleted the e-mail and continued packing. "You been out for a year now, what's it like?"

"Beirut Banking, almost a year now," said Tariq, his eyes on his glass. He didn't look as excited as Phil thought he would. Being a young professional in Beirut seemed the logical extension of the hard-partying U of B lifestyle Tariq had led for years. Maybe that was the problem. "It's great."

Standing near the door was a large group of men in buttoned-up shirts and women wearing veils, what looked to be a group of ten or so. They were a Muslim family—their similar appearance and faces, the variance in age from a toddler in a *hijab* to an old man stooped over a cane, their unabashedly

loud exchanges all seemed to indicate they were a family. They were not being seated, although there were enough tables available to push together and make room for them all. Phil noticed three of them looked around his age, maybe a year or two younger. There were two boys that were dressed like more conservative versions of Tariq, and there was a girl without a veil—Phil had learned it was optional, among less conservative families— who, unless it was a trick of light, had green eyes.

Tariq followed his eyes. “Fuckin tourists,” he said. “Probably Yemenis. Maybe Palestinii.” He turned to Phil and grinned. “It’s gonna take a while for them to get seated here.”

“I thought the Lebanese were known for hospitality,” said Phil.

“Hospitality’s got limits,” said Tariq. “Sometimes you gotta send a message.”

“What are you talking about?” said Phil.

“Don’t be ignorant, man. You know what we gotta do here. *Abi* and me and the neighbors at home, we’ve had to push ‘em out of neighborhoods in Zahlee.”

“That’s fucked up, cuz.”

“No cuz, that’s life. We’re talking about the survival of culture here. Maybe actual survival. And you know what? It wouldn’t kill them to blend in a little. I mean—come on man—when in Rome. They could wear some nice clothes, maybe lose the veils. They could stop talking in that fuckin awful country accent so everyone can hear.”

“I can’t really hear a difference,” Phil said.

“Of course you can’t,” said Tariq. “They don’t teach you shit in your Arabic classes. I mean nice try, cuz, but I’m glad you’re not taking em anymore. You should have heard yourself talk. You sounded so formal, it was like fuckin Shakespearean shit.”

Phil laughed as Tariq launched into an impression of his stuttering Arabic from previous years. He was trying to get the green-eyed girl to look at him, not flirting really, just trying to make sure what

he saw had been real. No luck—her attention was fixed on an intense debate between her brothers or cousins. When he tried to find her later while leaving, she was gone.

Phil contemplated the kafta. “My food is getting cold,” he said.

“You’re not gonna eat it?” said Tariq.

“I’m actually not that hungry. I ate on the plane.”

“Cuz, two rules,” said Tariq. “Never eat on airplanes, and never eat alone.”

Phil shrugged. “I do it all the time at home.” It was true: he hadn’t bothered to befriend anyone at school enough to have a lunch buddy, and his and Nahla’s work schedules kept them eating separate, microwaved dinners.

Tariq shook his head. “This isn’t America, man. We don’t have TV dinners here. It’s a community thing, you know?” He broke off a lamb fragment from Phil’s plate and chewed. “Why else you think everyone is looking at you funny here?”

Phil had been wondering about the eyes of the café regulars, his wonder turning to resentment: they can tell I’m American, he thought, they know I’m not one of them. They probably all knew my dad and what a fuckup he was: they can probably read his failure written on my forehead, left to right.

“Let’s get you smoking man,” said Tariq, gesturing to the waiter for a check. “The *arghylii* is what you need.”

“There a hookah bar around here?” Phil asked. Back home, Phil’s hipper friends loved the *arghylii*—they called it “hookah”—and they made sure to extend invitations his way whenever they went. Phil enjoyed the sweet smoke but began to feel like the Lebanese equivalent of the cigar store Indian, his invitation simply a token gesture towards the inventors of the lamp-like device.

“You kidding me?” was Tariq’s response. “I know a place, it’s maybe ten minutes from here, with this belly dancer. She’s getting on in years, but she’s one of the best in Beirut.”

An hour later Phil sat with Tariq in the fruit-and-flower shop smell of a hookah bar, getting drunk. Tariq had hand-slapped a man with the build and complexion of a Hollywood mob boss upon entering. “*Ibn ami’s* dad is dead,” he spoke into the man’s ear. “Bring some *arak*. Keep it coming.” The waitress who brought the bottle smiled at Tariq as she set down the tray.

“I think she likes you,” said Phil.

Tariq smirked. “You have no idea how much.”

They sat at a table already full of Tariq’s friends and coworkers from the bank. The *arak*, when diluted, turned from clear to milky. Its taste was bitter anise, like the black licorice Nahla would buy when Phil was a kid. He had hated the flavor then, and he did not like it much now. But the liquor was paid for by Tariq, and drinking in the wake of his father’s death seemed the only rational thing to do. Phil tried to refill his glass and Tariq stopped him. “Never from the same glass,” he said. He motioned to his waitress and several more tumblers were brought to the table.

“Why not?” asked Phil.

“Makes it bead up or something. I don’t know. Always a new glass for new *arak*, that’s what I know.”

“Seems like kind of a waste,” said Phil.

Tariq shook his head. “Just go with it, man.”

They drank toasts to Ramses’ memory and ululated at the young dancers that took the small stage against the back wall. Their bodies undulated like boneless creatures. They danced to Arab music in a minor key, a key that had not changed in millennia, old-world notes over computerized techno beats. Their eyes looked painted on, like the cartoons of queens on pyramids. Their skin was impossible shades of olive, of coffee.

“These are just a warm-up,” Tariq promised. Every time they finished a glass, more were brought to the table.

At hookah bars at home, Phil's friends would ask him if he knew the songs they played, mostly the Arabic equivalent of Top 40. He would tell them that he didn't know any Arab singers after Fairouz, and they would blink incomprehension. They couldn't understand that Phil didn't possess up-to-date information on the whole of the Middle East. The fluctuation of gas prices, the religious convictions of terrorists, even the finer points of belly-dancing: all such questions were directed towards Phil, the token Lebanese guy. Tariq would have known, Phil thought. Maybe he should have played the part. Maybe, in his indifference, he had let down his people.

Phil gestured to the surrounding buildings, high rises built over bombed-out shells. "This is a great place to end up."

Tariq shook his head. "Yeah, Samir fixed everything up. Got me a desk right next to his buddy from college, so he can make sure I'm not, I don't know, looking at porn on the job or some shit. Babysit me on weekdays, listen for crazy stories from the weekend. Less freedom than in fuckin college, man."

Phil was surprised to hear Tariq's anger at his father. It had never occurred to him that a father who gave you everything could make you half as angry as a father who gave you nothing. He tried to change the subject. "College must have been pretty good for you, though."

This was enough to divert Tariq's attention. "Listen to me, man. I have conquered this city, woman-wise, *nam?* Name a fuckin ethnic group in this country, I've nailed her."

"Maronite? Yeah, that's obvious. Uh, Melchite?"

"That one was a little prude. That one was hard work."

"How about an Israeli?" Phil was trying to stump him now.

"My one weak spot. Third base. Fuckin snobs anyway."

"Who was the best?" Phil was curious, in spite of himself. He wasn't completely inexperienced, but everything about his cousin's dress and demeanor told him Tariq, like in school and careers, was far ahead of him in carnal matters.

"Druze, far and away," Tariq said.

"The worst?" Phil suspected he knew Tariq's answer.

"Do you even have to ask? Muslim girls."

"Sunni or Shia?"

"Does it fuckin matter?"

"Just curious."

"If you're thinking about it? Don't. You'll get involved in some bloodline jihad shit and get killed.

No *ut* is worth dying for, especially not Muslim *ut*. You know they're taking over this country man. They won't do a census anymore 'cause of that civil war bullshit, but they outnumber us something like 70-30 with help from their fuckin tent-dwelling friends from Gaza. And they are breeding so fuckin fast that they'll be the world's biggest religion in twenty years. Them, not us. Can you believe that shit?"

"Listen man, I don't know much about this whole thing, but they lost their homes," said Phil
Thousands of them. Don't you feel a little sorry for them?"

"No. You know why? Because I've got cousins and uncles, and you too, they're yours too, and I'll never get to meet them because some fuckin asshole in a scarf shot em or blew up the bus they were on." Tariq put his glass down for emphasis. "Fuck. Them." For a moment Phil thought Tariq might actually hit him. Adolescent wrestling matches had revealed the potential for violence Tariq had. Phil had never forgotten the wild aggression that seemed unleashed in him when they touselled on the floor of Samir's den. It seemed to Phil that when Tariq led the *dabke* he was finding another outlet for that aggression. It had also occurred to him that Tariq, when wild-eyed drunk, might get violent.

Talk was tense in the following moments, and into the tension had slipped the ghost of Phil's dad. It came spilling out, a son's sloppy confession. "I never knew the guy," said Phil. "Not really. But it was like he never left us, in a way. All those bottles he sent, the arak. And Nahla was so angry, man, all the time. She didn't even want to come out here to see him."

"There wasn't much to see."

"If those two could have just resolved their shit. He just took off. He took off and never looked back. And it's like, why'd he fuckin have me if he was gonna pull that shit?"

"You're getting too deep," said Tariq, putting up his hands. "Stop that shit. Course the guy gets married, has a family, tries his hand running a business. It's the Lebanese way."

"It wasn't his way," said Phil.

"Exactly," said Tariq. "He was a *harram*. Fucking up was just what he did. Every family in Lebanon had got one. It's all that pressure, you know? It's just too much. And no more of this what-if shit, all right? He fucked up a lot, but he had you, and that's the best thing he ever did. No bullshit."

Phil was quiet for a minute, contemplating his arak. He knew now that Tariq had forgiven his father, but there was very little for Tariq to forgive. He was angry that Nahla had not done the same, but now he wasn't sure he had forgiven Ramses himself. "This arak is pretty good," he finally said.

"Not as good as your dad's," said Tariq. "Best I ever had. No contest."

Phil nodded phony assent. "One thing he did right." It seemed wrong to admit, in this bar, that he had received all that arak and never once tasted it.

Tariq patted his shoulder. "We're going to the club now. Come on, cuz, let's get you laid."

Phil wanted to ask, what about the dancer? But the dancer was forgotten history, she was the ruins of Byblos, and the night moved with alcoholic fluidity to the third-largest dance club in Beirut. At least, that's what Phil thought Tariq was saying over the chest-thumping thud of the sound system. Phil was disoriented, his footing uncertain. He always felt awkward in Cleveland's few dance clubs; when invited, he'd always found reasons to decline. The half-bottle of hundred-proof liquor he'd just tucked away should have given him courage, but Phil was pretty sure one of Tariq's friends had put *hashish* in the hookah at some point and now the room was spinning. Phil anchored himself to girls for balance. His

dance form was horrible. He had to crouch his too-tall body into an unnatural, almost fetal position just to see a girl's face while he danced.

Reflecting on the night, Phil would realize girls had probably danced with him for the novelty of it, for seeing up-close the worst-dressed guy in the club, the guy who'd only been admitted because his cousin was friends with the bouncer, the ugly American in white sneakers. But that night he allowed himself to be guided by Tariq from girl to girl. Phil got bold, kissed a couple necks, but the girls just walked away or else turned his head around and kept dancing, which was somehow worse. He was nursing a Beirut-made beer for poise when he saw her, the girl from the café. Her clothes were lighter now, in color and texture, but the timid, almost fearful way she carried herself, and those green eyes—it had to be her. It was strange that fate had brought her and Phil to the same café, the same club, but Phil was in motion, there was no time for reflection now.

Relating the story of the night to his mother later, Phil couldn't remember how he'd started dancing with the Muslim girl. He remembered staring at her from the bar, her alone and shy in a far-removed corner of the dance floor. Then their bodies were contorting awkwardly to fit joints together, to align crotches in such a way as to enable a rhythmic swaying to the tune of technofied Arabic beats. He was fairly sure he'd acted independently of Tariq. No, Tariq wasn't there, not when they started dancing. Phil did remember the moment of the kiss. Back home it would have taken him several shots and enough Billboard hits to span a decade before he made a move, but in the liquid movement of the night he hadn't hesitated. She had. He felt her lips tighten against the onslaught of his tongue for just a second before they parted, tentatively, to embrace him. He knew this couldn't have lasted long, no more than a minute, before the brothers were on him.

Phil knew the brothers were shouting insults, profanities in Arabic Tariq had taught him since he was nine, but he couldn't make any of them out. What he heard, he couldn't distinguish from the "*Yallah! Imshae!*" lines that were ubiquitous to the Arabs of Hollywood. Angry yelling and the confusion

of being pulled bodily from the girl by two pairs of unseen hands. That's what he remembered clearly. It may have been his kiss with the green-eyed girl had granted him the power, temporarily, to see from outside his body. It may have accounted for his calm remove as the events unfolded. One of the brothers—one, he learned, was named Karim, the other Rahman, but he couldn't remember later which was which—was scolding the girl, who was yelling and on the verge of tears. The other switched off yelling at her and yelling into Phil's face. He could discern individual words now—"sister," he heard, and Arabic for "fucker" too—but the structure of the sentences, the Arabic syntax, was lost on him completely.

A semicircle had cleared around Phil and the two men, people who wanted to dance without violence moving away from conflict. Tariq may have seen the semicircle and, in his drunken state, sensed danger, and maybe that's how he made his way over to them. With the out-of-body clarity, Phil realized that Tariq had had a lot to drink, maybe twice as much as Phil had. In his temporary transcendent state, Phil couldn't make out much of what Tariq said either, but he thought he heard "landya," a term that, when he asked Nahla about it later, made her shake her head and sigh. There was some tentative shoving, and then the knives appeared. Phil saw Tariq's first, but his attention had been focused on Tariq; afterwards he couldn't say for sure if it was Tariq or the other brother, the one berating his cousin, who had drawn first. This was not a rehash of their ancestors dueling to death with daggers. Tariq might not have got his blade flipped from its handle before Phil grabbed his wrist and pulled it down. He had stepped between them—fluid motion—and disarmed Tariq.

*

The family was called the Azems, and after Phil and one of the co-workers had dragged Tariq to a table, they invited him to join them. There were four of them here: the two brothers he'd almost fought, their cousin Jasmine, and their uncle, a middle-aged man called Mustafa with the waxed mustache of a melodrama villain. The family, Phil realized as Mustafa made introductions, was so large

and varied in age that Karim and Rahman were not the girl's cousins, but her nephews. Phil arrived as the uncle was chastising the brother that had been carrying the knife.

"I am sorry for my nephews," he said.

Phil blinked, unsure of what to say. "*La bas*," he said. "No big deal."

The mustached man looked impressed. "*T'kalum Arabii?*"

"*Q'lilan*," said Phil.

"You are *Lubnani*, like your cousin there?" He nodded to the table where Tariq was slumped over, being examined now by his co-workers.

Phil nodded. He called to mind the basic conversation from his Arabic classes. "*Abi min Zahlee, wa ami min Aitaneet.*"

"We are from Aitaneet as well," said the man, "from the countryside, tourists like your cousin say. But we do not think we are Beiruti, like your cousin."

"I'm sorry about him," said Phil. Heat had returned to his face. He was starting to come down from his zen-like clarity. He realized he had a few things to apologize for. "And I'm sorry for, you know..."

"*Hullus*," said the man. "Is over now." To Phil's horror, he gestured for the green-eyed girl to sit next to him. Her eyes were fixed on a spot on the floor, but she did not look entirely unhappy.

"This is my cousin Mohja." Mohja and Phil exchanged quiet hellos, and dodged eye contact. "She is shy. It is her first time in a Beirut discotheque."

"Mine too," offered Phil.

"We do not usually condone this behavior," the mustache man said, "but we make understanding. Her first time drinking is tonight. We do not usually, but tonight we order *arak*, top shelf. The owner brought it himself. We bought the last bottle."

Something in the girl Mohja's lips had tasted bitter and familiar. An idea struck Phil somewhere behind his eyes so that they were near-brimming with tears when he asked, "Who was the maker?"

"I have never heard of this brand before. It is called Maloof. Is the best I have had." The man must have misread the expression on Phil's face when he said, "We have one more glass left, you would like some?" Phil declined, and the man's demeanor became businesslike again. "You seem like nice boy. I have talked with my family, and you may join us for tomorrow's lunch if you would wish."

"I would like that," said Phil. Mohja looked up and briefly smiled.

"Is settled then." He wrote down a restaurant name and a number on a napkin and gave it to Phil. "We see you at noon, *inshallah*."

"Tomorrow, *inshallah*," said Phil. He walked to Tariq's table and, supporting his cousin on one shoulder, began the long walk back to their hotel.

*

Phil did not slump back into his hotel room until four in the morning. He found Nahla sitting on the chest, awake, cradling a glass of milk-white liquid and ice.

"It may be time for your first glass of *arak*," she said.

"Not my first," he said. "But I'll take it." She held out a glass and he took it. He stopped her before she poured. "Is it Dad's?"

Nahla smiled. "He left a bottle to your uncle. I tried to give it back, but Samir would not take no for an answer. I think he knew I needed it."

"That's not the only place Dad left a bottle," said Phil. He relayed the story to her, from the café to the nightclub to the knife, and the strange meeting after.

"Your father's *arak*," said Nahla. "Amazing that it would be there. Why did you turn it down?"

"Because," said Phil. "When I had my first glass, I wanted it to be with you."

Nahla smiled and said nothing for a moment. "So you have a Lebanese girlfriend now," she said. "Your *siti* would be so proud!"

For a second Phil was in fifth grade again. "She's not my girlfriend," he said.

"It's a shame you can't meet her tomorrow."

"Shit!" Phil had forgotten about the funeral. "I guess I'm an asshole now."

"You're not an asshole," said his mother. "You're an Arab."

They both laughed, then were silent. And into that silence crept the ever-present ghost of Phil's father. But for the first time, he didn't inspire anger or shouting. His power had been diminished by death. The only pain it was capable of inflicting now was the pain of the past, sadness and nostalgia, the pain from old wounds.

Nahla was the first to speak. "Your father," she said. "I did love him once."

"But he was a *harram*," said Phil.

"He was *harram*," she said. They were quiet for a moment, moving only the ice in their glasses.

"To poor souls then," said Phil. Their glasses chinked.